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**THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT
OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLERS
WITH THEIR EMPLOYERS**

Perspectives of Belgian Travellers

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ABSTRACT

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- TITLE: The Psychological Contract of International Business Travellers with their Employers.
- KEYWORDS: Psychological Contract, International Business Traveller, Belgium, Interpretive phenomenology.

Subsequent to the growing need for internationally mobile talent, alternative forms of international assignees have arisen (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). This study focuses on such newly appointed internationally working employees, particularly International Business Travellers (abbreviated to IBTs). Inspired by a lack of research attention relating to this labour population, this DBA project opens up the black-box of the IBT working partnership. This is achieved by surveying the role of the IBT as well as the distinctiveness and the state of the psychological contract that the employees involved have with their current employer.

The research described and substantiated in this work was devised from the IBT's perspective, and occurs within a Belgian context. Consistent with a – methodologically revitalising – interpretive phenomenological framework, the study was operationalised on the basis of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with nine IBTs.

The thematic data analysis carried out indicated the multifarious, intercultural and strategic role of the IBT, and brought skills specifically characterising the IBT to light. The IBT psychological contract was summarised by eighteen content-related obligations, which contemporaneously display contrasts and similarities with related reference research. The contract in question proved to be evaluated generally positively by the research participants and to

develop itself in a unique manner through a noteworthy relational base mixed with a non-negligible transactional facet.

Along with a discussion of the principal insights found/contributions made, this thesis includes a number of study limitations, recommendations for further research and implications for successful IBT psychological contract management. Personal reflections are, where relevant, also provided throughout this work.

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I would also like to thank my family, friends, fellow DBA students, colleagues and program managers who have supported and motivated me throughout this process. I did not always return your attention and energy to the same degree... I thus have to catch up somewhat...

The IBTs interviewed of course made this research possible – without your input, this work would not exist. Thanks also to you, and perhaps – hopefully – until a subsequent investigation!

DEDICATION

For my mother.

Voor m'n moeder.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The necessity for organisations to be able to adapt themselves swiftly to changing market circumstances has increased considerably over recent decades. With the renewal of economic activities and foreign investment flows following the Second World War, the locally tinted economic landscape created space for multinational organisations to develop (Taylor 2000; Buckley 2002). This multinational company, characterised by operations in various countries that are adjusted accordingly and managed independently, became central to the international business agenda in the 1970s (Levitt 1983; Taylor 2000; Buckley 2002). The 1980s were then defined by the emergence of the global economy, in which companies – as proposed by Levitt (1983, p. 92) – operate as if the world (or major regions of it) is one huge market (Buckley 2002). Nowadays, globalisation is seen as an insurmountable, expanding, yet positive challenge (EquaTerra 2008).

In conjunction with the ever more global market where companies can and have to move their operations around, the need for highly skilled and internationally mobile employees has risen (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). If firms, working across national frontiers, are to prosper, their managers must be able to function in a global context (Stroh et al 2008). However, finding and being able to retain internationally mobile talent appears to pose a serious challenge for today's broadly active organisations. A global study published in Harvard Business Review reports that only 15 per cent of companies in North America and Asia believe to have sufficiently qualified successors for their key roles (Fernández-Aráoz, Groysberg and Nohria 2011). The situation for Europe appears to be somewhat better; but even so, companies that focus on strategic growth (particularly in emerging markets) are lacking experienced managers (Fernández-Aráoz, Groysberg and Nohria 2011). Selecting and efficiently retaining the right people for international assignments within the current global business dynamics is consequently not

easy, yet very important (Stroh et al 2008; Meyskens et al 2009). Skill shortages as well as talent mismatches are after all considered a threat to elaborating business opportunities (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2012). In the light of these staffing challenges, alternative forms of international work – complementary to the traditional long-term foreign positions/assignments – were (and are still being) developed (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007).

This doctoral research concentrates on a new form of international employees such as this, specifically: International Business Travellers (hereinafter abbreviated to IBTs). For this study and partly by my own proposed definition, IBTs are presumed to be ‘professionals who travel internationally (to various locations) on a regular basis for business purposes, without the accompanying presence of family (with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks)’ (Shaffer et al 2012). In other words, IBTs concern executives for whom international travel constitutes an ‘essential component’ for/of performing their work (Welch and Worm 2006, p. 284).

The perceived employment deal of a population of IBTs is in this DBA setting investigated using psychological contract theory principles. In simple terms – but dealt with in greater detail later in this work – the psychological contract essentially relates to ‘employees’ and employers’ perceptions of the other party’s obligations’ (Pate and Scullion 2010, p. 57). The definition by Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997, p. 151) is adopted in this study as a basis for further concept application, more specifically: ‘the perceptions of mutual obligations to each other held by two parties in the employment relationship, the organisation and employee’. The choice, strength and value of the psychological contract as a framework of analysis are justified by drawing on the work of a number of authors. Rousseau (1995), Guest (1998a, p. 659; 1998b), Guest and Conway (2002) and Taylor and Tekleab (2010) amongst others emphasise that the psychological contract is a ‘fruitful’ and relevant – in fact increasingly used – construct to make sense of, analyse and explain a working partnership. The contract in question proves to be a ‘mature’ concept around which to organise thinking and research regarding employment

relationships (effected in this context with the IBT as focal point of interest) (Guest 1998a; Conway and Briner 2009, p. 15). In connection with this Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) as well as Marks (2001) furthermore remark that the concept is nowadays to be found with prominence in managerial texts related to human resource management. This consequently strengthens the applicability of the psychological contract within this practice/management-oriented, yet academically founded, DBA research.

Several investigations have already demonstrated that certain groups of employees have specific needs and therefore obtain a particular psychological contract. For instance, Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) found that employees stationed abroad – for a long period – have a role-typifying contract. They illustrated that those internationally based staff members experience very interpersonal psychological contracts which consist of many more elements than that of regular employees (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994). O'Donohue et al (2007) investigated the features of the psychological contract of knowledge workers and provided conclusions on this. Svensson and Wolvén (2010) concentrated on the contract of temporary (agency) workers, as did McDonald and Makin (2000) and others. For Bal et al (2010), older employees formed a research focus population designated as unique; Atkinson (2007a) researched the psychological contract within small companies. Various authors have also aligned their contract research to a certain country by looking at the respective nation's working population – as for instance can be found in the collected work of Rousseau and Schalk (2000) where Belgium, France, the US, Hong Kong, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands and others countries are discussed, each with their own research and context distinction.

However, a search for literature on psychological contracts of IBTs yielded little or no results. Merely a few subject-related studies could be found. The inquiry by Demel and Mayrhofer (2010), for example, focused on the work and career aspirations of frequent business travellers. Mayerhofer et al (2004) and Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert (2004) in their studies highlighted career/management issues which impact assignments involving

frequent travel without relocation. Beaverstock et al (2009; 2010) furthermore explored the phenomenon of international business travel in general; Welch and Worm (2006) as well as Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) analysed the role and activities of the travellers concerned along with the factors that may intervene their performance. Shaffer et al (2012) reviewed literature on and developed a taxonomy of global work experiences. Another (small) number of authors investigated the sources and impact of executive travel stress (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Espino et al 2002; Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008; Westman, Etzion and Chen 2009). Still, neither of the aforementioned work nor other studies encountered (and referred to later in thesis) directly relate their international human resource focus with the concept of the psychological contract. This observation is nonetheless in contrast with the growing number of business trips taken, the importance of this within the current dispersed business context and the explicit call of, certain, researchers for the development of new research agendas relating to alternative (short-term) international assignments and the travelling assignees themselves (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004; Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007; McKenna and Richardson 2007; Beaverstock et al 2009; 2010; Shaffer et al 2012; Björkman and Welch 2015).

The IBT – at present rather invisible in research and management literature – is therefore addressed in this study. Specifically, the underlying features of the IBT employment partnership, the IBT psychological contract, are studied within the country context of Belgium.

1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Addressing the aforementioned research gap(s), the central purpose of the research of this doctorate study is to reveal the black-box of the IBT's psychological contract, approached from an employee's/IBT's perspective.

The principal research question dealt with is: **‘How do IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contract with their employers?’** This overarching inquiring is broken down into two related sub-research questions:

- What is distinctive for the IBT’s psychological contract, in terms of content and nature?
- What is the state of the IBT’s psychological contract?

The above questions are approached within the business context of Belgian IBTs working for companies that are active on an international level with their head-office or a subsidiary located in Belgium.

In order to be able address the central research question **‘How do IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contract with their employers?’** meaningfully, an additional sub-research question has been put forward (during the course of study-operationalisation). Insight concerning the population of/for research, i.e. Belgian IBTs, should facilitate the clarification strived for on their psychological contract. The supplementary sub-research question, and in fact the one first considered, is consequently formulated as follows: ‘What is the role of the IBT?’

In general, this research seeks to contribute to:

- the recently emerged International HRM-knowledge field of non-long-term international work/assignees by shedding light on the role of Belgian IBTs;
- the broad research area of the psychological contract theory by in-depth, exploratory study of (Belgian) IBTs’ contract distinctiveness as well as the state of it;
- subsequently setting this in the context of other relevant/partly related literature and research.

This work is elaborated in accordance with a subjectivistic research paradigm – more specifically interpretive phenomenology – with a corresponding qualitative, phenomenological methodological approach. A study development such as this may be viewed as a methodological revitalisation

within the abundance of rather quantitatively (positivistic) tinted questionnaire-survey analysis within psychological contract research (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefal 2008; Conway and Briner 2009; Taylor and Tekleab 2010).

The related overall research aim of the work-approach employed is to capture ‘the essence(s)’ of the phenomenon being studied, i.e. the psychological contract of IBTs with their employers (Miles and Huberman 1994, pp. 8-9). The choice of and use of phenomenology does not attempt to establish generally applicable laws or theories concerning the IBT employment deal; instead what is strived for is gaining a practical and richer understanding regarding meanings and actions (in this case) derived from the experience of Belgian travellers (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Furthermore, as this thesis is part of a professional doctorate research, it is intended to add value to the related practice of management and to present recommendations geared specifically toward practitioners in/interested in the field of international employment.

1.3. THE BELGIAN RESEARCH CONTEXT

Notwithstanding its international flavour, this study has been designed from a Belgian work context-lens. The choice of Belgium as focus country for this research is twofold.

On the one hand, there is a practical comfort associated with this choice of country, since this is where I originate from and where I currently live and work.

On the other hand, Belgium plays a ‘pivotal role’ – as also illustrated later in this work (see 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVEL) – within today’s internationally characterised economy (FEB-VBO et al 2012, p. 7). Despite its limited size of territory (30,528 km²), with a particularly open

economy Belgium assumes a strategic location on the north-western side of Europe – both figuratively and literally (OESO 2011; FEB-VBO et al 2012). Multinationally operating enterprises are therefore present in the country in an economically dominant fashion, and in various sectors (FEB-VBO et al 2012). The combination of this geographical advantage with internal company-specific strengths (and coupled with high labour productivity) make Belgium a major hub and export platform for existing global business networks, or those to be newly built up (FEB-VBO et al 2012; Van Rie and Marx 2013). The presence of a number of international political institutions (EU institutions and policy bodies, as well as the NATO headquarters) also enhances Belgium's international allure and trade (Van Rie and Marx 2013). As a result, research focused on Belgian key figures (IBTs) who are part of this top international reality is deemed both interesting and useful.

Without wishing with this work to provide a complete overview of Belgium's business culture and labour market, some background is nevertheless important for the psychological contract concept under study. After all, the Belgian labour market is – compared with the aforementioned international orientation – considered less open, in the sense that it is characterised by a robust institutional complexity (Sels et al 2000). That historically, yet also culturally and politically, developed complexity translates itself amongst other things into a layered governance with both a federal and a sub-federal level (and through – with the exception of urban policy – three regions, three communities and ten provinces) (FOD 2012). For its population of eleven million inhabitants – of whom 62 per cent of those aged 15 to 64 have a paid job – Belgium possesses six governments that have various and constantly changing authorities (FOD 2012; OECD 2013). This multi-level governance structure is in addition significantly impacted by the strong presence of interest organisations (trade unions and employer organisations) and several – three of them national – language unities; which moreover do not entirely correspond with the political division of regions (Sels et al 2000; Van Rie and Marx 2013). Belgian labour-market management is therefore differentiated by continual consultation and negotiation between parties with a range of agreements and laws resulting from this, consistently drawn up in consensus

(Sels et al 2000; Van Rie and Marx 2013). The related legal and psychological contract formation must consequently be viewed within this already long-existing compromise-oriented tradition (Sels et al 2000).

Notwithstanding the web of rules present, according to studies by the OECD (2013) high life satisfaction turns out to have been registered in Belgium. The belief in political institutions and actors is indeed on the decrease (reinforced amongst other things by the recurrent crises¹); nevertheless, trust in the main welfare institutions (social security, health, education) remains extremely high and steady (Van Rie and Marx 2013). In connection with this, the need and desire for a wealth/income redistributive social security is pronounced (Sels et al 2000; Van Rie and Marx 2013). A significant portion of the Belgian population acknowledges social inequalities as being part of their modern welfare state, but at the same time see an important role set aside for the government to accommodate this inequality (Van Rie and Marx 2013). This tension between individualism and collectivism – named by Sels et al (2000, p. 60) as the Belgian ‘paradox’ – is also reflected in a Belgian management approach, infused with pragmatism, whereby rules and principles can be applied with a degree of flexibility. Despite the fairly rigid, complex Belgian institutionalism, an attitude such as this promotes specific employment deals that are difficult to typify in a straightforward manner (Sels et al 2000). Studying the psychological employment contract of Belgian IBTs from a wide, subjectivistic approach – as performed in this study – thus appears all the more appropriate and fitting.

¹ Besides the global financial crisis situation in 2007-2008 and its profound economic impact, Belgium also experienced an additional political blockage in 2010. Following the federal elections of thirteen June 2010, the political parties involved failed to succeed in arriving at an immediate/swift agreement (in relation to constitutional reform, amongst other things) which entailed a record-breaking 541 days of forming a government (Van Rie and Marx 2013).

1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Since within a phenomenological research framework the phenomenon of study ‘reveals itself’, at the start of an investigation there is always a degree of mist concerning the content-related relevance of the research subject (Gibson and Hanes 2003, p. 190). Notwithstanding this factor of uncertainty, for this study a number of essential key strengths were nevertheless put forward. The contributions proposed or anticipated at this project’s start eventually became clearly apparent with the progression of the work, contributing towards the significant nature of the research.

A general explanation is provided below regarding the scientific and practical/policy contributions of this research, as well as regarding the sometimes-difficult coherence of both intentions. Concluding from a more experience-oriented viewpoint, at the end of this thesis a degree of attention is again paid to the study’s contributions (see 6.4. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE).

1.4.1. SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

In accordance with the abovementioned, the results of the doctoral research in question provide a contribution to reducing the research gap(s) currently present and clearly indicated in the literature in relation to the psychological contract of IBTs. Psychological contract research that focuses on IBTs and specifically Belgian IBTs is, at present, non-existent. For this reason, the study is scientifically substantial. The study findings offer a contribution (possibly in a modest way from the viewpoint of study critics, but as suggested by Remenyi et al (2010) not therefore of less value) to the respective bodies of knowledge, since new – empirically acquired – insight is gained by applying an existing scientific concept (the psychological contract), albeit in an adapted form, within a ‘new’ International HRM/IBT-context.

The use of a research strategy (i.e. phenomenology) previously employed in a limited way, at least in this field of study, can also be considered a contribution to science. Methodological originality such as this presents an answer to the challenge – expressed by Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefal (2008), Conway and Briner (2009) and Taylor and Tekleab (2010) amongst others – to think more creatively about psychological contract research methodologies to be applied.

1.4.2. CONTRIBUTION TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Besides scientific relevancy, it is and was endeavoured to make the research practically relevant. Practical relevance is hereby broadly interpreted as the impact of research on the/a management decision process that can optimise a company's functionality, effectiveness or efficiency (Nicolai and Seidl 2010; Wolf and Rosenberg 2012).

By researching the psychological contract of (Belgian) IBTs, organisations can gain greater insight into the pattern of perceptions relating to the working partnership of the relevant employee category (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997). It offers organisations figurative handles or guidelines for approaching work-relationship issues, understanding and predicting changes, and adjusting their staffing/HR policies accordingly if necessary (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000; Pate 2006). Insight such as this is of vital importance since according to Stroh et al (2008), successful international projects supported by a successful international HR policy will be the key to successful international companies in the 21st-century global market. After all, companies that are unable to find and retain their 'globally savvy business leaders' may lose continuity in management as well as critical corporate knowledge (Peltonen 2001; Stahl et al 2009, p. 92). A flexible, globally oriented and culturally competent workforce accordingly represents a unique and critical value for international business actors (Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt 2010). Understanding regarding the employment deal of the IBT is then of crucial importance in order to align

international HR or recruitment practices to this type of international employment, which is even expected to grow/increase in popularity (Petrovic, Harris and Brewster 2000; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007).

1.4.3. THE DIFFICULT-TO-SURMOUNT RESEARCH PRACTICE GAP

It proves not to be new but in fact common that barriers arise impeding the overlap between and the amalgamation of theory and practice (Van de Ven 2007). Barriers such as these can occur in various forms. On the one hand practitioners are sometimes only aware of research findings to a limited degree; various studies (by Rynes, Colbert and Brown (2002); Sanders, van Riemsdijk and Groen (2008), amongst others) in particular state a disinterest or at least limited interest amongst managers in reading scientific papers/literature. On the other hand, it turns out that practitioners who are aware of scientific knowledge sometimes also fail to implement this, mostly due to a gap between the beliefs of researchers and scientists (Rynes, Colbert and Brown 2002; Rynes, Giluk and Brown 2007). Since it is intended with this work to record a degree of progress in both a scientific discipline and an organisation's operation, attention is deliberately paid to the research-practice gap in order to reduce this (Van de Ven 2007; Sanders, van Riemsdijk and Groen 2008). Stroh et al (2008) after all report – in the context of international assignments – that the wealth of scholarly research appears to be hidden away in academic publications and unknown by the relevant professionals – who might ultimately benefit from this knowledge/insight.

In particular with this study, it is and was attempted to bring together 'mode 1 – academically initiated knowledge production' and 'mode 2 – knowledge co-design' (Huff 2000, p. 293). The employed 'mode 1.5' knowledge production methodology – as named by Huff (2000) – was characterised by academic-practitioner conversations throughout the entire course of the research. The attention to meta-discourse associated with this therefore avoids/avoided mono-disciplinary toolbox thinking of unengaged and demarcated research (Van de Ven 2007; Ellson 2009). The abovementioned active consultations

with practitioners were conducted within my professional practice as Deputy CEO of a Belgian HR service provider. Contact with, amongst others, HR officers (from Belgian companies operating internationally) and other organisations active within HR is therefore extremely common within this professional context. Furthermore, a scientific sounding board for continual evaluation of research and cross-fertilisation of ideas was set up through contact with my supervisor (Dr Carol Atkinson: expert in the area of psychological contract research) and peers (further explained later in this work).

The initiatives noted – specifically: the consultations with practitioners, academics and equivalent researchers – should have therefore narrowed the potential gap between research and practice for this study.

1.5. STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

This chapter provided an introduction to the present thesis. The research questions, objectives and overall aim as well as the significance or justification of the study were discussed.

The subsequent two chapters of this thesis contain a literature review of, on the one hand, the IBT (chapter 2) and, on the other hand, the psychological contract (chapter 3). Both chapters outline not only the theoretical framework of the main research-concepts, but as far as possible links are made (specifically, suppositions are posited) concerning the psychological contract of the Belgian IBT.

Chapter 4 discusses more in detail the design with which this research was devised. The interpretive phenomenological research path followed is described, as well as the methodologies and methods associated with this and employed. The manner of data collection together with the analysis is explained and substantiated. A review of measures regarding the retention of

study quality is furthermore presented before concluding the chapter with some ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 concerns the practical elaboration of the data analysis provided in chapter 4. The research participants' story is first of all disclosed; following this, an answer is offered to the research questions formulated in this introduction by means of thematic analysis. Where relevant and possible, the fifth thesis chapter contains a discussion concerning the findings and a comparison with that which was examined/supposed in the literature investigation (chapter 2 and 3).

The final chapter of this work (chapter 6) discusses the scope and findings of the research conducted and formulates a summarising/general conclusion. Study limitations, recommendations for further research and some more specified feedback regarding to the contributions and implications for practice of this work are also integrated into this concluding chapter.

It should be noted that the various chapters of this work are coloured with personal comments and my own reflections that came to the fore during this research and when writing it out. My critical notes are not incorporated into a separate reflection chapter, but can be found where applicable throughout the entire text. The aim of integrating these personal thoughts is to share my own insights and ideas – gained through this research – concerning the IBT psychological contract and the research in this regard: as a researcher (in business administration) and HR professional, I am convinced that the research results presented this way in context can be better and more fully understood.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVEL

The first part of the literature review of this study, before concentrating on the psychological contract, explores the evolutions leading to and incorporated within international business travel. At the outset, the still expanding globalisation trend is briefly discussed. The broadened and ever more creative international employment alternatives accompanying the relevant trend are then treated. Finally, further explanation is offered on what is understood under the term IBT (at least of what is established in related – rather limited in extent – literature).

2.1. INTRODUCTION: GOING GLOBAL

Globalisation – referred to by Giddens (1991 in Cojocaru 2011, p. 994) as ‘the social and economic development relationships that extend throughout the world’ – has become a fact of today’s business life (Stroh et al 2008). Since the late 1980s, the global economy has been subjected to a rapid, dynamic transition (Gunz and Peiperl 2007). This transition is characterised by various economic fluctuations, the emergence of the knowledge economy and breath-taking technological developments (Buckley 2002; Gunz and Peiperl 2007). While the global economy appears to be impacted by the downturn of the past few years (as noted by Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2012a)), the globalisation strategies of organisations have continued to evolve – although not necessarily the same way in all geographies, for all companies and for all industries. In other words and broadly speaking, companies remain/remained focused on striving to maximise their performance through worldwide integration and flexibility – without being able nowadays to do this blindly, but being aware of the challenge that ‘one size does not fit all markets’ (Ernst and Young 2011).

After all, the structure and character of the global economy has changed recently. Newly emerging and rapidly growing markets (such as the BRIC² countries) are becoming essential trading partners and centres of growth, consumption and production (FEB-VBO et al 2012). Developed economies are also for the first time being confronted with, amongst other things, an increasing shortage of raw materials and the economic/social costs associated with an aging population (FEB-VBO et al 2012). Within the current economic landscape, the successful integration of globalised elements/strategies within national economies is therefore becoming ever more crucial (FEB-VBO et al 2012).

Concomitant with these developments, the related branch of management studies that 'covers all the issues related to managing the global workforce and its contribution to firm outcomes' – International HRM – has expanded significantly in recent years (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007; Björkman, Stahl and Morris 2012, p. 1). It has shifted from a concentration on managing staff transfers in multinational companies to consider broader organisational and contextual issues (Björkman, Stahl and Morris 2012; Björkman and Welch 2015, p. 136). However, despite its extensive growth in the past few decades the focus within International HRM research remains at present associated with long-term international assignments/assignees; diversity according to employment form is an incipient/quite new field of discussion (Björkman and Stahl 2006; Collings and Scullion 2006; Collings, Scullion and Dowling 2009; Björkman and Welch 2015; Collings, McDonnell and McCarter 2015). Consequently, yet notwithstanding the growing importance of new/alternative forms of international working, there is currently a relative dearth of research exploring non-traditional global staffing arrangements (Collings, Scullion and Dowling 2009; Björkman and Welch 2015; Collings, McDonnell and McCarter 2015). Additionally, the cross-fertilisation of the

² BRIC is an acronym used in management literature that refers to the countries Brazil, Russia, India and China.

International HRM school with different scientific disciplines, in this context such as the 'psychological climate' of the work relationship, involves a still nascent/supplementary line for research attention (Collings, Scullion and Dowling 2009; Björkman and Welch 2015, p. 143). By integrating a side research-concept, the psychological contract, within the newly advancing branch of study of alternative international staffing this work adds to the continuing/interdisciplinary expansion of the International HRM field (Björkman, Stahl and Morris 2012; Björkman and Welch 2015; Collings, McDonnell and McCarter 2015).

Belgium, as the country on which this research concentrates, understands as no other the importance of globalisation for its economy, and therefore coordinates its policy in this sense. In view of the limited (small) size of the country, attention is and must be paid to export and foreign investments as factors determining prosperity (Ernst and Young 2012). These efforts (along with the other nation-specific advantages depicted in 1.3. THE BELGIAN RESEARCH CONTEXT) entail that Belgium – based on the KOF index of both 2012 and 2013 – is deemed the most globalised country in the world for the combination of three dimensions: political, economic and social integration (Konjunkturforschungsstelle 2012 in FEB-VBO et al 2012; ETH 2013). Various other investigations – for instance the Ernst and Young globalisation index – also confirm this top position. Ernst and Young each year measures the openness of the world's 60 largest economies based on five criteria: trade, capital movements, technology, foreign employees and cultural integration; in management jargon, this scale is known as the 'globalisation index' (Ernst and Young 2012). Belgium here also scores well and occupies fourth place on the 2012-list – after Hong Kong, Ireland, Singapore (Ernst and Young 2012). The table below (table 1) presents the top-10 globalisation index:

Table 1: Ernst and Young globalisation index (FEB-VBO et al 2012)

| POSITION | COUNTRY | INDEX 2011 | TRADE | CIRCULATION OF CAPITAL | CIRCULATION OF LABOUR | CIRCULATION OF TECHNOLOGY | CULTURAL INTEGRATION |
|----------|-------------|------------|-------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Hong Kong | 7.42 | 9.8 | 7.4 | 4.6 | 6 | 9.3 |
| 2 | Ireland | 7.24 | 6.7 | 7.8 | 6 | 9.5 | 5.8 |
| 3 | Singapore | 6.88 | 10 | 6.2 | 4.4 | 6.5 | 6.9 |
| 4 | Belgium | 5.81 | 6.4 | 6.8 | 5.2 | 6.1 | 4 |
| 5 | Sweden | 5.72 | 5.4 | 6 | 4.4 | 8.4 | 4 |
| 6 | Denmark | 5.7 | 5.3 | 6.2 | 4.4 | 8.3 | 4 |
| 7 | Netherlands | 5.58 | 6.3 | 5.8 | 4.9 | 6.5 | 4 |
| 8 | Switzerland | 5.46 | 4.9 | 5.4 | 6.3 | 5.9 | 4.8 |
| 9 | Finland | 5.39 | 5 | 5.6 | 4 | 8.1 | 3.8 |
| 10 | Hungary | 5.19 | 6.4 | 5.1 | 4.5 | 5.7 | 3.8 |

Globalisation of trade and industry today – aimed at more than just Belgium – not only entails a more complex external environment (by for example rapidly evolving technologies, growing markets and diversity in the competitive arena), it also requires more globally prepared and active workers (Harvey et al 2010). As stated in an Economist Intelligence Unit report (2010, p. 20) examining what a company will look like in 2020, ‘the effective and efficient use of the global talent pool’ is seen as a ‘hallmark of good HR practice in 2020’. Harvey et al (2010) refer in this challenged international business context to a study by McKinsey Global, indicating the substantial negative effects of a lack of global qualified management in both global expansion and financial figures/performance of internationally active organisations. Consequently, obtaining an understanding of those professionals working across borders is more than ever becoming vitally important in order to create competitive advantage in today’s global economy.

2.2. GLOBAL STAFFING OPTIONS: LOOKING BEYOND EXPATRIATION

Along with the changes in the globalising economic landscape, new forms of international employment have recently appeared on the horizon. The relevant alternative assignments came into view and are nowadays used next to the conventional long-term or – as designated in related jargon – expatriate assignments (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007). Expatriate jobs involve missions where the employee and his or her family (if present) move to a host country (different than their initial home country) for work purposes, for a specific period, usually more than one year (Petrovic, Harris and Brewster 2000).

Academic interest for expatriation appeared with the internationalisation flow of US companies after the Second World War (Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson 2005). Since the 1980s, long-term expatriation (and the repatriation concerns related to it) as well as inpatriation issues formed and still form the main foci of research within the broad field of International HRM – albeit with a burgeoning variety in a country context (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Björkman and Stahl 2006; Collings and Scullion 2006; Björkman and Welch 2015). Nonetheless, this long-term international employment deal is losing its unique dominance, while alternative and new global staffing options are gaining significance (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007).

The diverse motives behind this rise of alternative non-long-term international assignments, encountered in the literature, are treated hereinafter; the challenges concerned are discussed in accordance with their demand and/or supply-side issue nature (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007).

2.2.1. DEMAND-SIDE CONSTRAINTS TO EXPATRIATION

In general – and in literature apparently without discussion – it can certainly be said that improved communication technologies, the relative ease of

movement (transportation) and expanded access to skilled local talent have already prompted organisations to manage their international operations in other and more efficient ways (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005; Demel and Mayrhofer 2010). At present, organisations have broader possibilities for international task/project execution, compared with the rigidly national operation characterising pre-globalisation (Mayerhofer et al 2004). For instance, presence on site is in many cases easier to organise than previously; constant presence in countries/companies where business is done is also no longer strictly required in order to monitor international business activities (Beaverstock et al 2009). Ever-expanding travel-substituting technologies such as – but not limited to – videoconferencing, Skype and email allow companies a parallel and continuous multi-country focus without having to provide any or fixed presence on site.

Moreover, new companies, coming from emerging markets, and smaller enterprises nowadays find themselves in the field of international trade; this has entailed new types of international employment besides expatriation that have been specifically tuned to the needs/operation of the organisations concerned (FEB-VBO et al 2012). For example, certain minor companies commence their international import/export activities gradually, others concentrate only on international partnerships for manufacturing or knowledge acquisition, while others (the so-called born globals) are immediately active in various countries at their founding (FEB-VBO et al 2012). Classic expatriation is therefore, in these altering circumstances, no longer the only or perhaps not even a possible way of filling international assignments.

Additionally, and independent of the type of internationally operating organisations, solutions have being/are sought for facing cost issues related to expatriation (Demel and Mayrhofer 2010). In this context the 2007 Brookfield Global Relocation Trends Survey demonstrates that 70 per cent of the businesses questioned looking for alternatives for long-term assignments indicated cost concerns as the most important reasons for this (Brookfield Global Relocation Services 2007). Stroh et al (2008) moreover point out that

international (long-term) assignments appear to be the single most expensive per-person investment a company makes for globalising its workforce. Welch and Worm (2006) pursue this line of thought, albeit more moderately, whereby expatriates are considered expensive. Various studies consequently expose that internationally active companies modify (or plan to adjust) their mobility strategy so as to be able to work more cost effectively: a shift away from expatriation to short-term assignments is named as a cost-aware solution in this context, next to increased use of local talent (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010; Salt and Wood 2012). This trend is furthermore intensified by the current times of recession, in which a greater emphasis is placed in cost saving (Salt and Wood 2012).³

³ It should however be remarked that some authors, such as for instance Sparrow, Brewster and Harris (2004), report that multinational businesses seem to have little knowledge on either the complete costs related to expatriate assignments or the benefits of various other types of international employment, which makes a valid comparison difficult (in Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007, p. 202). Brookfield Global Services Relocation (2012b) confirmed this and also illustrates in its recent survey that only a limited percentage (nine per cent) of the internationally operating organisations questioned measure expatriate return on investment. Petrovic, Harris and Brewster (2000) furthermore specify in this context that just like expatriation alternative international employment is also perceived to be expensive, with an identical marginal note that there does not seem to be any clear cost monitoring systems implemented for alternative international employment forms (at least for the scope of their Cranfield survey). The comparison of expenses between conventional expat-assignments and new international employment forms are thus hampered. Despite this vagueness concerning the cost aspect it is nevertheless generally assumed that the expenses for long-term international assignments are about three to five times higher than the annual salary of a comparable home based position; a cost awareness attitude is therefore appropriate and applicable (Selmer 2001). After all, there are not only increased wage costs specifically for expatriate assignments (whether or not with hardship allowances) but also expenses linked to the relocation and assimilation (possibly also repatriation – see below) of the expatriate and (if applicable) his or her family (Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004).

2.2.2. SUPPLY-SIDE CONSTRAINTS TO EXPATRIATION

Although young professionals are currently more open and interested in working across borders than before (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010), research by Forster (2000) reports that very few employees and their families are nowadays eager to tolerate disruption to their personal and professional lives (which is implicitly associated with international relocation and thus long-term expatriation). The 'migration for work survey' by ManpowerGroup (2011) shows that executives of developed markets are less inclined and enthusiastic to relocate abroad for their job, which is explained by the need/wishes of the executives involved to stay closer to home/family support systems during uncertain times. The fear of candidate long-term assignees of becoming 'out of sight, out of mind' as far as their professional and private life is concerned, is very relevant here, as well as – the more recent/new – terror incidents in the aftermath of 9/11 that caused some resistance against international relocation (Konopaske and Werner 2005).

In addition, dual career issues and/or wished for stability in educational requirements for families with children represent serious obstacles related to expatriation (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007). Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) refer in this context to a questionnaire in which 300 multinationals (mostly from the US and EU) cited dual career issues as the main reason why employees refuse international long-term assignments. When other studies then cite that approximately 75 per cent of expatriate assignees are involved in a dual career situation, the large scale and impact of the question at hand become obvious (Brookfield Global Relocation Services 2006). Consequently and seen from an employer's point of view, not only the (plummeting) supply of professionals willing to engage in an expatriate function represents a difficulty, family affairs can influence the success of an expat-mission as well (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007). The proportion of expatriates who fail in their assignments – due, amongst other things, to the aforementioned family aspects – is significant; estimates of early return vary from five to twenty per cent (Stroh et al 2008). The effectiveness and accommodation of expatriates (willing to relocate) in a foreign environment is

therefore uncertain which, referring to the previous paragraph (considering demand side and related cost issues), may result in unexpected/undesired but major expenses (Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004). For instance, the expenses as a result of a failing or early return assignment – according to various, albeit not recent, studies and depending on the country or region – vary between 250,000 and 1.25 million USD (Mervosh and McClenahan 1997). The return-on-investment (ROI) for expatriation is therefore uncertain and according to Stroh et al (2008) considered to be weak.

Moreover, organisations may have difficulty offering a psychologically expected and motivating (not internationally based) job to returning expatriates (Peltonen 2001; McKenna and Richardson 2007). If repatriates stay in their parent companies after coming home, some/most feel that their skills and knowledge are underutilised (Stroh et al 2008). Cox, Khan and Armani (2012) report and illustrate in their work that a significant number of the expatriates returning to their home base leave their respective company/employer two years after the return. Stahl et al (2009) refer to the fact that – within a US company context – 20 to 25 per cent of repatriated employees leave the company within the first year after having returned. This percentage appears to increase (through voluntary departure) to half within three years following repatriation, according to Black et al (1999 in Stahl et al 2009, p. 93). As a result, expatriate retention constitutes a serious concern for both the company and the repatriated in his/her environment.

2.2.3. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

Along with today's business circumstances which are in continual flux, the challenges exemplified above with managing both repatriation and expatriation form the main reasons why organisations – not only multinationals, but also the small to medium sized businesses operating more and more on a global basis – have gone looking for new ways to do global business and to develop global skills differently (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Morley and Heraty 2004; Shaffer et al 2012). Nowadays, the flexibility

which characterises short-term international assignments appears more easily acceptable for and socially desirable by the assignees themselves (Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005). Konopaske and Werner (2005) prove in their study in a significant way – although in a US context – that managers are more inclined to accept short-term international assignments than long-term projects. The supply-side issue that is perceived to be a problem within an expatriate (long-term) context becomes less critical in this way (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007). Studies indicate further that from the organisations' side the introduction of business trips is also seen as a (logical) solution to solve the expatriate dual career issues as no relocation of the family/spouse is concerned (Organization Resources Counselors 2002 in Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm (2005) likewise remark that the introduction of short-term assignments to companies provides the advantage of being able to respond swiftly/more swiftly in an also less administratively complex way, than is the case with expatriate missions.

In any case, this positive note/adaptation does not imply that expatriate assignments are written off; they are supplemented by a range of new and different forms of global employment (Collings, Scullion and Dowling 2009; Brookfield Global Relocation Services 2012b).

In relation to the various types of alternative short-term international/global work experiences, there is (still) no unambiguous academic classification; diverse terms and types of global work are used mingled or sometimes together (Salt 2010; Shaffer et al 2012).

Referring to research by Petrovic, Harris and Brewster (2000) – published on the webpage of Cranfield School of Management (CReME) – three emerging trends in types of international work can be distinguished (apart from expatriate or long-term assignments), these being:

- **SHORT-TERM ASSIGNMENTS:** assignments with a specified duration, usually less than one year (with possibly a family relocation);

- INTERNATIONAL COMMUTERS: employees who commute on a weekly or fortnightly basis from their home country to their workplace in another country (while their family – should they exist – stay in their home country);
- FREQUENT FLYER ASSIGNMENTS: employees who regularly undertake international business trips but who do not relocate.

An identical classification and definition of new forms of international work is devised by Peltonen (2001) (which is similarly, but not identically, found in the work of Salt (2010)). The studies of Mayerhofer et al (2004), Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert (2004) and Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) combine the abovementioned latter two categories of international short-term work (specifically international commuters and frequently flyer assignments) under the denominator 'flexpatriate assignments'. Flexpatriates are hereby described as: 'not-relocated, but frequently travelling professionals' (Mayerhofer et al 2004, p. 1,371). With the relevant naming, the authors strive to avoid confusion with frequent flyer flight programs and to also emphasise the flexibility related to/required with the job (Mayerhofer et al 2004). Inkson et al (1997) discuss – albeit in their less recent research – the term 'overseas experience' as an alternative to the expatriate assignment with which a shorter international experience is initiated by the individual.

In addition, Welch and Worm (2006) deal with two other non-standard international assignments, more specifically 'rotational' and 'contractual' assignments that could possibly be linked with 'international commuters' and 'short-term assignments' respectively (however, without being absolute synonyms). Employees in a 'rotational' employment format are supposed to commute from their homeland to another country of employment for a short specified period, followed by a rest period at home; 'contractual' assignments are used in situations where material experts with specific skills are appointed to an international project for a period ranging from six to twelve months (Welch and Worm 2006, p. 283).

Shaffer et al (2012, p. 1,287) generate in their study – except for short-term assignment and referring to the flexpatriate naming by Mayerhofer et al

(2004) – a further refinement of what they indicate as ‘global travellers’, listed and described accordingly below:

- SHORT-TERM ASSIGNMENTS: employees on international assignments that are longer than business trips yet shorter than typical expatriate corporate assignments, usually less than one year;
- FLEXPATRIATES: employees who travel for brief assignments (usually one or two months), away from their home base and across cultural or national borders, leaving their family and personal life behind;
- INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLERS: employees who take multiple short international business trips (usually one to three weeks) to various locations without accompanying family members.

Besides the aforementioned, Shaffer et al (2012) amongst others also refer to ‘global domestics’ and ‘global virtual team members’ as new ‘global job responsibilities’ that however entail only limited or no physical/global movement. ‘Global domestics’ imply employees who remain at their home base, but who have active responsibilities and/or cooperation with organisations/individuals from other countries (Shaffer et al 2012, p. 1,301). ‘Global virtual members’ (or ‘virtual assignments’ as they are called by Welch and Worm (2006, p. 283)) work in and interact via communication technology with internationally dispersed groups of people with a mandate to implement decisions with international components or consequences (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000, p. 473).

Distancing itself from the missing single classification of the various types and the accompanying definitions of alternative non-long-term international assignments (as illustrated above), the doctoral research conducted and described here is aimed at IBTs; this without demeaning the significance, the emergence of and the need for research pertaining to other global work experiences or assuming to have described these here exhaustively.

For the basic notion of what is meant by IBT, this work refers to the definition proposed by Shaffer et al (2012, p. 1,287), namely: ‘employees who take multiple short international business trips (usually one to three weeks) to

various locations without accompanying family members'. This definition has nonetheless been put in my own words for the purpose of this study. The quantitative, not specifically defined, reference to 'multiple' business trips by Shaffer et al (2012) is replaced with a designation stressing the continuity and business purpose of the job-characterising travel, namely 'travel on a regular basis for business purposes'. The label 'regular' supposes a travel percentage of at least ten per cent of the normal working hours (working on location should thus be an essential part of the job). Furthermore, and in order to avoid any confusion and/or lack of clarity with other short-term assignments, an indicative maximum journey-duration period is included in the definition. Consequently, for this work, IBTs are demarcated as: 'professionals travelling internationally (to various locations) for business purposes on a regular basis, without the accompanying presence of family (with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks)' (Shaffer et al 2012).⁴ In the context of this study 'professionals' are 'employees', in other words not independent, but rather men or women working in an employment relationship. Men and women are studied together, nevertheless bearing in mind that women are still less frequently taken on for international business assignments than men – although nowadays already more than was previously the case in the 1990s and beforehand (Adler 2002; Altman and Shortland 2008).

⁴ Wickham and Vecchi (2009) discuss in their work – elaborated within the software industry in Dublin – a taxonomy for business travellers that, besides the frequency of travel, is also based on the traveller's task focus. They differentiate in increasing order of travel intensity, specifically: 'commuters' (characterised by regular repetitive trips with a limited range of destinations), 'explorers' and 'nomads' which are constantly on the road with a number of new destinations increasingly respectively (Beaverstock et al 2009; Wickham and Vecchi 2009). Wickham and Vecchi (2009, p. 254) furthermore discuss 'missionaries' (who travel to customers to disseminate knowledge) and 'visiting tradesmen' (who work on customers' sites) as additional categories of travellers. This taxonomy is, however, not further dealt nor used in this study.

Given the proposed definition contains a clear reference to business-travel frequency, IBTs can in no instance be viewed as synonymous with global 'managers' (Cappellen and Janssens 2010). The definition of 'global managers' as Cappellen and Janssens (2010) state in their work could, after all, result in an incorrect resemblance. The authors define 'global managers' as 'executives who can work across borders, both functional and cultural, understanding the worldwide business environment from a global perspective, having developed the global mind-set of an integrator rather than operating as a domestically oriented defender or controller' (Cappellen and Janssens 2010, p. 339). However, 'global managers' do not – as specified by Cappellen (2008) – necessarily go abroad or stay there in order to perform their activities, and thus hereby differ from IBTs without being able/wishing to rule out that certain 'global managers' will be IBTs.

2.3. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER

IBTs are – as defined above – considered to be 'professionals travelling internationally (to various locations) for business purposes on a regular basis, without the accompanying presence of family (with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks)' (Shaffer et al 2012).⁵ Less formal but popular synonyms for these human resources, yet neglected in the literature, are 'road warriors', 'globe trotters' or 'frequent flyers' (used by amongst others DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich (2000), Welch and Worm (2006) and Welch, Welch and Worm (2007)).

⁵ Further on in this thesis, it is assumed that IBTs do not fulfil an expatriate function; Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) after all mention in their work the possibility of a double – in certain cases sometimes difficult to separate – function. As stated by Kellerman (2010, p. 166), 'travelling workers' (such as pilots, for example) and 'working tourists' (or travel guides) also fall outside the scope concerning IBTs to be studied.

The solid emergence of and the present need for an IBT population in the global economic landscape has already been explained in the previous sections of this chapter. The staff travelling concerned is considered to be an important mode of production, remaining omnipresent and expanding even during periods of economic recession (as recently encountered in the US and Europe) – yet practised at more a cautious pace with county-differences (Beaverstock et al 2010; GBTA 2012). This observed trend towards enlarged use of non-standard international assignments, such as the IBT's missions studied here, may indeed come across as conflicting somewhat with the contemporary and heavily technologically innovating business environment (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Nevertheless, despite the evolution in technology and communication systems, face-to-face meetings continue to retain their value in international business ventures and therefore also the related business travels (Beaverstock et al 2009; Cappellen and Janssens 2010; Salt 2010). In this sense, Davenport (1994) already argued years ago that vital information cannot be retrieved from computers, and that people prefer to acquire information from people. Various business transactions and/or certain function performance nowadays undoubtedly require face-to-face contact, although combined and supplemented with multi-media monitoring (Cappellen and Janssens 2010).

However, regardless the significance and increasing presence of international business travel encountered, a substantial explanation concerning IBT assignments and its management is lacking in literature (Welch and Worm 2006; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). This research 'lacuna' comes across as 'somewhat curious' since business travel is looked upon as a known, everyday reality – a ubiquitous feature of the professional life of many millions of people – within the modern global economy (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Welch and Worm 2006, p. 284; Beaverstock et al 2009, p. 193; Beaverstock et al 2010, p. 1).

It also appears, at least from a theoretical/academic perspective, difficult/not strictly possible or clear to determine which functions are specifically to be executed as an IBT and what role is allocated to them.

The current – and globally tinted – war of talent certainly entails that international recruitment has to be considered for more (not to say all kinds of) profiles and positions, since previously cross-border assignments were only reserved for high potentials or CEOs (Vandeleene 2012 in ABRA 2012, p. 7). Technical managers, call centre managers, call centre agents, financial and sales profiles, technical or IT operators, etc. are cited in this broadening context of internationally mobile employees (Vandeleene 2012 in ABRA 2012, p. 7). The study by Mayerhofer et al (2004) – specifically focusing on an Austrian multinational – also reveals that all levels within the company questioned are sent on foreign assignments if required. The IBT sample interviewed in the work of Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) – consisting of both a training consultant and a Group Vice President and product marketing manager – once again illustrates, amongst other things, diversity such as this. As a consequence, no conclusion can be drawn from the literature in existence today in relation to the position that is performed by/as an IBT. In summary and as proposed by Welch and Worm (2006, p. 285), IBTs are a ‘diverse group of employees’.

In the matter of the functional/organisational role of an IBT, Meyskens et al (2009) propose that IBT assignments are used primarily for projects, maintaining client engagement/relations, monitoring and business development; the authors in question believe management development to be of secondary value (at least compared with long-term international assignments). Mayerhofer et al (2004) in this context likewise refer to the broad range of purposes/accents connected to an international, non-expatriate, role and stress the dependence of work objectives with respect to specific organisational needs. Yet – and somehow in contrast with Meyskens et al (2009) – the authors concerned report that various expatriate roles can be fulfilled by short-term international assignees, for example: skills transfer, management development and management control (Mayerhofer et al 2004). Furthermore, and without making explicit reference to expatriate functioning, Beaverstock et al (2009) discuss and outline a comprehensive role particularly allocated to the IBT function, again based on and depending on

their modus operandi or work context; the table below (*table 2*) summarises their vision:

Table 2: *the role or functionality of the IBT – based on operation context (adapted from Welch and Worm (2006), Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) and Beaverstock et al (2009))*

| MODE/WORK CONTEXT | ACTIVITY |
|-----------------------|--|
| INTRA-FIRM | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organisational (e.g. group, divisional and regional meetings, staff briefing sessions) ▪ Strategy (e.g. closing or opening new units/factories, project work, R&D) ▪ Human Resource (e.g. joint training sessions, seminars) ▪ Troubleshooting (e.g. solving problems/technical problems, staffing shortages) |
| INTER-FIRM | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Client (and potential client) relations (e.g. product/service-support, demonstrating products to potential clients) ▪ Supplier-relations (e.g. quality control with foreign sub-contractors) ▪ Entrepreneurial (e.g. exploration, negotiating and closing deals and sales contracts) |
| EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foreign government relations (e.g. negotiating licences, visiting host country government officials) ▪ Professional body relations (e.g. visiting/participating in foreign trade missions) |
| LEARNING | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working on/attending trade fairs ▪ Conventions ▪ Conferences |

Shaffer et al (2012), in a another way, also assign a distinct role to IBTs; more specifically they assume that knowledge transfer, discussions and negotiations and participation in meetings or conferences mainly form part of the purpose of international business travel.

Notwithstanding the fact that the purpose of the IBT's functioning cannot be determined clearly/unequivocally (at least not in a generalist way and derived from existing related studies noted above), it is nonetheless suggested that

IBTs have the capacity to act as 'powerful knowledge transfer agents' with both an external and internal company focus (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007, p. 180; Salt 2010). Moreover, they appear to be appropriate for performing specialised or irregular tasks and valuable for developing foreign networking activities (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007). In this respect, IBTs are 'at the heart of international business' and play a fundamental, important, role within the global knowledge-based economy (Welch and Worm 2006, p. 284; Beaverstock et al 2010). The strategic nature of the poly-contextual IBT 'resource' – as stated by Welch, Welch and Worm (2007, p. 181) – proves to be clear and prominent in the literature at hand. It is worth commenting that this consideration, of IBT assignments being of strategic importance for companies and its critical nature to global success, can for instance also be gleaned from the study by Tahvanianen, Welch and Worm (2005) and Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt (2010), yet dealing with short-term assignments and flexpatriates respectively.

Nevertheless, there are also certain issues and possibly certain problems incorporated within international business travel that might consequently obscure the strategic nature of the IBT role.

The self-management capacity of the assignee – especially related to work or cultural issues and to the balanced planning of one's spare time – proves critical to the success of the assigned mission (Mayerhofer et al 2004). The brief period of travel and the usually rapid or unexpected departure require maximum engagement on the part of the IBT to allow professional commitments to tie into his/her private life, as well as a huge capacity for adaptation given the short stays in varying locations (Mayerhofer et al 2004). The individual's ability to operate in unfamiliar environments and handle cultural differences both effectively and quickly are demanding, but crucial (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Research conjointly indicates that IBTs are sensitive and susceptible to the negative side effects of frequent and unaccompanied travelling, as for example: relationship/family problems or conflicts due to the multiple absences, pressure to resolve matters at the home office before as well as while being on the road and the heap of work

that is waiting upon the return, etc. (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000). It is however noteworthy that the fire-fighting skill that women must nonetheless possess (and aside from the international aspect) to be able to juggle their work and family life works to their advantage in a rapidly changing travel context such as this – at least as posited by Altman and Shortland (2008). Tung (2004) also comments in this regard that female international assignees are more resilient against the isolation associated with working overseas and can better cope with conflict mediating stress (than their male counterparts). Demonstrating the female capacity for adoption and listening skills means that women should be better suited for performing international work and – according to certain studies – could/should serve as ‘ideal’ candidates for international assignments (Tung 2004; Altman and Shortland 2008, p. 211).

Independent of the presumed gender advantage or disadvantage, Welch, Welch and Worm (2007, p. 176) add jet lag and health problems as quite obvious drawbacks or ‘stressors’ of international and frequent travel. Stress in this international context is seen as an inseparable characteristic of a flexible and unpredictable lifestyle (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000). Stress – defined as ‘a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being’ (Lazarus and Folkman 1984 in Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008, p. 459) – may imply a possible heavy, negative and conflicting impact on both the business traveller’s family and on his/her own work performance (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Espino et al 2002; Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004; Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008). Espino et al (2002) indicate with their study questioning spouses and staff of the World Bank Group that a significant high percentage (close to three quarter) of the staff concerned showed high to very high levels of stress due to business travelling; half of the spouses subsequently also mentioned to cope with stress when their partner is on a mission. Moreover, being able and having to work in two work contexts – domestic and international – as well as the constant workflow associated with the possibilities of modern technology, may increase this stress pressure for

the IBT or the sensitivity to it (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). In related literature, there are discussions on whether the greatest incidence of stress occurs just before, during or after the trips – however, without disputing the presence of and the rather negative connection between stress and international travel (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008).

At the same time and despite all of the negatives, stress is perceived by some IBTs to be an adrenaline rush (although not by all of them) (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007; Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt 2010). For certain executives concerned, business travelling not only proves to be educative, challenging or socially stimulating, but also to generate new ideas for business and product development (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000). In accordance with this Westman, Etzion and Chen (2009) mark the positive relationship between the number of trips undertaken by an IBT and his/her level of vigour (as an element of work commitment). Without wishing to generalise, research furthermore indicates that with the flexi-type (IBT) lifestyle the time at home for the business traveller can be more focused or intensive, and the time during the trip can be used for the proverbial recharging of the batteries (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008). This job characteristic, often well experienced by the employee, also implies advantages for the employer in terms of efficiency in imposing strict task-related objectives which can be carried out with little or without a degree of distraction (Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004; Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005). However, and notwithstanding the fact that the aforementioned findings appear very promising, the positive effects associated with business travel have till now only rarely been studied (Westman, Etzion and Chen 2009). In literature, associations between psychological disorders, stress and other health problems with the amount of travelling are in the main found to be present amongst internationally travelling staff (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Espino et al 2002; Westman, Etzion and Chen 2009).

Consequently, to cope effectively with the abovementioned job-risk points and so to let the IBT strategic potential unfold within organisations, there turns out to be a role and support-function for the organisation in which the traveller is employed. Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm (2005, p. 671) state in their study survey that as far as managing non-standard international employment is concerned, companies find themselves at the beginning of the 'learning curve'; Welch and Worm (2006) refer to the marginalised function of HR in this context. Stroh et al (2008) indicate in their work that international assignees may be/are often being evaluated by regional or corporate executives who have little international experience and therefore do not fully understand the assignee's work context. Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) amongst others – as did Mayerhofer et al (2004) – looked into and stress the urgency to develop specific attuned HR policies to support alternative, non-long-term employment forms too. Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) emphasise in particular the need to recognise the IBT's vital role within the organisation as to support them in a consistent – not ad hoc – approach. Since travelling will increasingly be a component of executives' working lives in today's economy, which is also growing geographically, the need for strategic attention and research in relation to IBT employment is evident and is becoming urgent (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Beaverstock et al 2009). The more the phenomenon of non-standard forms of international employment – such as international business travel – is growing, the greater the necessity for a more structured, difference-reconciled and thus non-standardised approach to their management (Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005; Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). As Morley and Heraty (2004, p. 642) additionally state, 'new thinking' is required in order to understand better the peculiarities and specialities of short-term assignees, and thus also the IBT.

2.4. CONCLUSION

This first part of the literature review of this study shed light on the essential presence of alternative non-long-term international assignees within the current globalised economic landscape. Global business is after all becoming a norm in which it is no longer only expatriates who play the main role. Despite the fact that research in the area of alternative forms of international employment is still in its 'infancy', an attempt was made to look beyond the expatriate tradition and to arrive eventually at a definition of the IBT that is further used throughout this study (Shaffer et al 2012, p. 1,309).

No clear-cut role for the IBT could be derived from the literature review, but rather a multitude of roles – yet mostly deemed important/strategic – were found. Together with this, a number of factors were introduced that may impede the IBT role execution and their success. In contrast to the role to be assigned to the IBT that is difficult to establish, there turned out to be a clear role set aside for organisations employing IBTs, at least from the literature available. Attention to IBTs' employment and related needs was declared urgent; the call for further research is consequently overt and strengthened.

The psychological contract theory can be used in a valuable way in order to gain this required insight in the employment relationship of the IBT and provide organisations with an understanding on how to attune their policy to the relevant employees (Guest 1998a). Rousseau and Schalk (2000, p. 11) in this context explicitly state that in modern times 'there can be no productive employment or successful firms without functioning psychological contracts'. The following section therefore involves a literature investigation concerning the psychological contract, in order to provide a theoretical base for understanding the IBT psychological contract.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

In this second literature-summarising chapter, the psychological contract is examined. The foundation of the theory is dealt with first. After having identified and justified what is understood by the psychological contract concept in this study, the distinctiveness of the contract is then discussed. The content as well as the nature of the psychological contract is examined in this regard and subsequently put into an IBT perspective, primarily using investigations that concentrate on the one hand on international assignees – expatriates for the most part, and on Belgian employees on the other. The review of literature is ended with a discussion on the state of the psychological contract, from both a general and an IBT viewpoint.

3.1. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: EXAMINING THE CONCEPT

3.1.1. THE EVOLVING DEFINITION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

Since its first formal introduction in the 1960s, the psychological contract has prominently been part of human resource management and organisational research – both in the related practical and academic discourse (Conway and Briner 2009). The concept has its roots in an exchange perspective; it is specifically derived from Barnard's (1938) theory of equilibrium that describes conditions for how an organisation can spur its members on to lasting participation (in Roehling 1996). In broad terms, this theory suggests that employees receive inducements for which they make contributions, and

continue doing so provided the inducements are at least as great as the contribution requested/required (Roehling 1996).⁶

Over the years, the psychological contract has received various adjusted definitions with specific approaches and conceptual differences. Consequently, there only proves to be a limited degree of consensus and even confusion regarding the precise or most comprehensive concept definition (Marks 2001; Guest and Conway 2002; Roehling 2008). According to Pate and Scullion (2010), the terminology formulated in the definition along with the viewpoint from which the definition is reached constitutes the major issues of/for discussion. A concise and, as far as possible, chronological outline is provided below of the evolutions in defining the psychological contract, in order to arrive at a suitable conceptualisation for this work.⁷

Argyris (1960) – often referred to as the founder of the psychological contract – used and developed the concept of the ‘psychological work contract’ to typify the relationship between employees and their foremen; he specified this contract term – at that time seen as new – as an ‘implicit agreement between employees and their foreman to respect each other’s standards’ (in Van den Brande et al 2002a, p. 4; 10). Levinson et al (1962) and Schein (1970) amongst others expanded on the Argyris’ description and added in particular the term ‘expectations’ to the concept (in Van den Brande et al 2002a, pp. 4-5). Levinson et al (1962, p. 21) in particular suggested that ‘the psychological contract is a series of mutual expectations of which the parties to the relationship may not themselves be dimly aware but which nonetheless

⁶ Blau (1964) – as a founder of social exchange theory – built further on the ideas of Barnard (1938) and focused among other things on the type of exchange relationship that develops between employees and employers (Shore, Coyle-Shapiro and Tetrick 2012).

⁷ For a more detailed comprehensive summary of the origin and developments of the psychological contract, reference is made to the article of the same name by Roehling (1997).

govern their relationship to each other'. With this new definition direction, the implicit nature was once again emphasised as characterising of the psychological contract. But the unspokenness concerned, already accepted by Argyris (1960), was now related to expectations forming part of the contract (Van den Brande et al 2002a). It nevertheless appeared unclear whether or not there was any agreement concerning these expectations, and only Schein (1970) talked about 'a matching' (in Van den Brande et al 2002a, p. 4). In accordance with Argyris' definition, the expectations of Levinson et al (1962, p. 22) were also 'mutually' interpreted with as specific, here more broadly designated, parties: the employee and the organisation (Van den Brande et al 2002a).

Kotter (1973, p. 92) built further on the above definition foci and viewed the psychological contract as 'an implicit contract between the individual and his organisation which specifies what each expects to give and receive from each other in their relationship'. He likewise approached the contract from the two-party concept, but reported and illustrated in his work that the expectations of both parties are not necessarily the same and thus may differ (Kotter 1973). Through his empirical inquiry – the first of its kind – he introduced the notions of 'match' and 'mismatch' for describing situations where the employee and the organisation agree (and also disagree) concerning a particular expectation (Kotter 1973; Roehling 1997). Kotter thereby indicated that the psychological contract construct is a powerful tool for determining behaviour (Freese 2007).⁸

It should, however, be pointed out that the original bilateral psychological contract development introduced by Argyris (1960) and followed by the aforementioned authors, amongst others, nevertheless entails a

⁸ The strength of the psychological contract is touched upon earlier and will be returned to later in this work.

consideration that has had a crucial impact on definitions and developments within psychological contract research (Marks 2001). This is because empirical research whereby both the employer and the employee – as parties to the psychological contract – are studied is difficult to operationalise; naming the organisation's expectations creates a sticking point, since the organisation itself does not after all exist (Van den Brande et al 2002a). The organisation consists of various actors or agents (top management, HR, etc.) who do not all necessarily adopt the same set of expectations (Freese and Schalk 2008).

With her term 'reconceptualised thinking' in 1989, Rousseau offered/offers an answer to the issue in question with a definition of the psychological contract that is easier to operationalise, whereby there is distancing from the idea that the contract should be considered as a two-party construct (Van den Brande et al 2002a; 2002b, p. 2). Rousseau (1989, p. 123) defines the psychological contract as 'an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party'. According to Rousseau's vision (and that of her followers), a unilaterally tinted contract such as this only exists 'in the eye of the beholder', and can consequently be ascertained by gauging the perceptions/beliefs of one party (Rousseau 1995, p. 8; Van den Brande et al 2002a; Freese and Schalk 2008). Developing this further, Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998, p. 679) present an adjusted and honed concept definition and describe the psychological contract as: 'the individual's belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party such as an employer (either a firm or another person)'. By introducing the term 'obligations', Rousseau departs for the second time – following the proposed shift from a relational/two-party focus to the 'individual' – from the previously applicable assumptions by no longer discussing 'expectations' as those describing the concept – cited above – prior to 1989 did (Van den Brande et al 2002a, p. 6).

However, the departure from the pre-1989 'expectations' definition element should be interpreted with a certain degree of caution; this is because the difference between the terms 'expectations' and 'obligations' does not always

appear to be clear and/or pioneering (Conway and Briner 2009; Taylor and Tekleab 2010). Van den Brande et al (2002a) as well as Conway and Briner (2009) and, amongst others, Taylor and Tekleab (2010) state that in various psychological contract definitions with 'expectations' presented as an essential component, a reference to the imperative nature of these expectations is usually made. They specifically refer to Levinson et al (1962, p. 36) who, amongst other things, discussed 'expectations' as having an 'obligatory quality'. Schein (1970) also stressed, as a contemporary of Levinson et al (1962), the compelling character of the psychological contract; a characteristic regarding which consensus can later/generally be encountered in literature (in Van den Brande et al 2002a, pp. 4-5). The difference between the terms 'expectations' and 'obligations' consequently disappears (at least in the eyes of the abovementioned authors). The particularity of terms could consequently be viewed as a purely terminological question.

In this linguistic discussion, it should furthermore be remarked that the/most authors who define the psychological contract as perceived 'obligations' emphasise that this involves 'obligations based on perceived promises' (Van den Brande et al 2002a, p. 14). Morrison and Robison (1997, p. 228) for example indicate that 'if a perceived obligation is not accompanied by the belief that a promise has been conveyed (e.g. if the perceived obligation is based solely on past experience in other employment relationships), then it falls outside of the psychological contract'. Those (and other) authors are thus strictly speaking discussing 'promised-based obligations' which implies that in this view the terms 'promises' and 'obligations' are ultimately inseparable (Van den Brande et al 2002a; Taylor and Tekleab 2010, p. 260).

Amid this discussion (possible confusion) regarding the definition elements to select, Roehling (2008, p. 287) proposes – albeit without any strong, generalisable evidence – that it is preferable *not* to regard 'probabilistic expectations' as a focal belief of a psychological contract conceptualisation. His study indicates that psychological contract measures/results supported from an obligations' focus have a greater predictive value towards negative

employee reactions (Roehling 2008). Earlier/other studies – such as that of Turnley and Feldman (2000), for example – also refer to unmet obligations provoking a stronger employee reaction than unmet expectations. In addition, Pate and Scullion (2010, p. 58) comment that in the current times of rapid change, a promise ('making explicit promises to employees') is less suitable, given the moral pledge associated with this, which is less applicable in today's business context. This way, they therefore also follow the noted preference for using the term 'obligations' when describing psychological contracts (Pate and Scullion 2010). As a consequence, for this study the focus on 'obligations' is thus chosen as a determining element in defining the psychological contract. This definition position is assumed without wishing to suggest that this is the only valid vision; after all – as also suggested by Coyle-Shapiro and Pazefall (2008) – the use of the various terms for defining the psychological contract opens up space for interesting controversy and discussion (as briefly stated above).

For a complete definition of the psychological contract, this work turns to the, bilateral, contract description of Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997, p. 151), specifically: 'the perceptions of mutual obligations to each other held by the two parties in the employment relationship, the organisation and the employee'. The motivation for this rests primarily in the established re-use of the bilateral element in recent research (referenced in what follows), with which I can align myself as a researcher. It must also be noted in full transparency that the discussion with both the promoter of this study (at the start of this DBA project) and with the assessors/doctors present at my Mini-Viva constituted an additional incentive to associate with this point of view.

3.1.2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CRITICALLY REVIEWED

Given its various interpretations and definitions (illustrated in a limited way above), the psychological contract concept is viewed by certain critics as a vague 'container concept' of questionable value (Guest 1998a; 1998b; Van den Brande 2002a; Cullinane and Dundon 2006; Conway and Briner 2009).

Nevertheless, this abundance of interpretations and the value-weakening of the concept this entails must be nuanced. After all the basic idea/the origin of the psychological contract notion, in particular reciprocal social exchange, is still central and occurs discernibly in concept descriptions (Freese 2007; Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall 2008; Conway and Briner 2009; Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2010; Taylor and Tekleab 2010; Bal and Vink 2011). However, despite this acceptance of the underlying mechanism of the psychological contract, the content and nature⁹ of what is being exchanged and for what appears in no sense determined or clear (Conway and Briner 2009). This is viewed by critics of the concept as problematic since, additionally, the exchange relationship occurs between parties at a different level (individual-organisation) (Freese 2007; Conway and Briner 2009). Cullinane and Dundon (2006, pp. 10-11) in particular resolutely suggest that employees are subordinated under employers from as soon as entering into a work relationship; an 'imbalance of power' such as this is inherently linked with both explicit legal employment contracts and with implicit sets of expectations included in the psychological contract idea. The authors believe that for this reason, the psychological contract presents a misleading image of the interrelationships between employers and employees (Cullinane and Dundon 2006). Other sources – such as, but not limited to, Larsen (2004) and Nauta (2012) – contrastingly refer to currently varying and more dynamic power relationships between employers and employees, mainly within the scope of organisations operating globally and if employees have unique competencies. These points of view or practice evolutions thus in a certain sense break through the rather traditional bureaucratic vision (of Cullinane and Dundon 2006, amongst others) with ingrained power asymmetry whereby the employer 'sets the agenda' (Larsen 2004, p. 868). In addition Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) – to whose work recourse is made for the

⁹ The psychological contract nature and/or the type of categorisation used for this study are explored in more detail as the chapter develops (see 3.2.2. The nature of the psychological contract: the relational and transactional differentiation).

definition of the psychological contract in this study – do not present the ambiguity characterising the exchange relationship between employer and employee as problematic; they explicitly state that variety such as this is inherent to the reality of organisational experience. Following this viewpoint, this study persists with the valuable rich nature of the psychological contract in order to acquire insight into the IBT work partnership within a Belgian work practice (Conway and Briner 2009; Pate and Scullion 2010), without hereby denying criticisms/concept debates conducted.

3.1.3. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CONCEPT APPLIED IN THIS STUDY

The psychological contract: a bilateral-definition approach

With their psychological contract term description – more specifically: ‘the perceptions of mutual obligations to each other held by the two parties in the employment relationship, the organisation and the employee’ – Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) break with the unilateral contract vision of Rousseau (1989). The abandonment in question, consciously assumed/followed in this thesis, is done notwithstanding of the multiple occurrences/the dominance of this view in related research/literature (Van den Brande et al 2002a; Conway and Briner 2009). Nonetheless, support for the useful and appropriate nature of using the definition proposed for this work is justifiable. An increasing amount of research has recently been appearing that focuses on contract definitions, whereby the perspectives of both the employer and the employee are taken into consideration, such as for example – but not limited to – Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000), Guest and Conway (2002), Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006) and Atkinson (2007a; 2007b; 2008). In particular, identical use of the definition of Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) can be found in the work of Pate and Scullion (2010). It can moreover be noted that Rousseau (2005, p. 81), in some of her recent works, appears to diverge from her purely unilateral concept definition by, amongst other things, emphasising that the psychological contract is shaped by the

individual assessments of the/both contract parties. Her increased attention with regard to mutuality and the presence of two parties within a contract relationship can – by way of illustration – also and for instance be found in her work with Shperling, by describing the psychological contract as ‘the beliefs each party has regarding a reciprocal agreement between worker and the employer’ (Rousseau and Shperling 2003, p. 560).

In accordance with the above, the bilateral, original contract conceptualisation therefore appears to have commenced its cautious ascendance as a basis for empirical research, which reinforces the psychological contract definition-choice on which this study is founded (Conway and Briner 2009).

The approach taken follows and responds also to the idea of Guest (1998a) proposing that the psychological contract entails two parties whereby agents can represent the organisation. Guest (1998a; 1998b) nevertheless recognises the difficulties with regard to defining the organisation, as well as the danger of over-simplistically anthropomorphising the organisation. However, he believes – in contradiction with the earlier one-party work of Rousseau cited above – that a narrowing of the definition entails a problem shift and a groundless metaphorical use of the term ‘contract’, whereby there is increasing/unjustified detraction from the richness of the original definitions (Guest 1998a; 1998b). In line with Guest’s (1998a; 1998b) comment, the abovementioned reference to reality cited by Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) (see 3.1.2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CRITICALLY REVIEWED) and also from the interpretive phenomenological vision with which this work is devised, the impossibility of a generalised or straightforward identification of who the organisation is, is not felt to be a problem but rather an appropriate, normal plurality in essential opinions. An incisive analysis will furthermore not be conducted in this study into who or what the organisation represents in the IBT psychological contract. Mention will be/is made of how the research participants personify the other contract party (the employer) – although without paying any further analytical attention to this (see 5.1. ANALYSIS INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS).

Despite the bilateral definition-approach taken, the research sample and data available for this study (described below) call for an exploratory study of the psychological contract of IBTs whereby only the employee's viewpoint is/can validly be taken into consideration. With this way of doing research it is not at all intended to undervalue the viewpoint of the employer and to deviate from the bilateral psychological contract definition that applies as the leitmotiv throughout this study. The research sample is only used in the manner most valid and faithful to quality, for insight into the study objectives proposed. Consequently, a first line as yet to be formulated for further research (and given attention later in this work, see 6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH) therefore involves the organisation's view of the psychological contract. Secondly, a direction relating to who represents or might represent the organisation or the other party as such also appears interesting for synchronising follow-up psychological research with this.

The psychological contract: a content/nature- and evaluation-oriented approach

Within this study the psychological contract concept is assessed from a content/nature-oriented approach (examining what is exchanged), and complemented with an evaluation-based view (analysing the degree of breach/fulfilment) (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998; Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande 2004; Chaudhry and Tekleab 2013). Despite the fact this work is elaborated as an in-depth snapshot of employee and employer interaction at a specific time, the psychological contract is certainly recognised in its 'process' approach. The contract concept is in that regard perceived as a process consisting of a series of unfolding events and the interpretation of these (Conway and Briner 2009; Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2010). The result of this is that in principle, the contract is in a state of 'ongoing formation' (Conway and Briner 2009, p. 132). Interesting publications related to this 'contract ongoingness' concern amongst others (although not limited to) the articles of Conway and Briner (2002), Pate (2006), Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro (2011) and Conway and Coyle-Shapiro (2012).

Anyhow, the content/nature-oriented psychological contract approach thoughtfully employed in this study – dealt with below and supplemented with an evaluation approach, as described in section 3.3. THE STATE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT – is valued in literature and widely used (Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande 2004; Sullivan et al 2010; Tetrick 2010). The approach is after all particularly suitable for focusing this work squarely on the elements characterising the specific IBT employment relationship (De Cuyper et al 2008; Tetrick 2010). Additionally, De Cuyper et al (2008) in this context refer to the content of the psychological contract proving to be of crucial importance in employees forming reactions concerning organisational commitment, job-related as well as general well-being. All are interesting domains for practitioners (for whom this thesis should mean added value). Furthermore, in this case and given the accepted subjective study foundation, the possible (criticised) non-objectivity of terms related to a content/nature approach and the difficult generalisation of descriptions do not constitute an obstacle (Sullivan et al 2010). On the contrary, this work is used to gauge depth experiences and rich descriptions of the IBTs involved, moreover concentrating on the ‘in return’ notion of their unique psychological contract items – whether in balance or not (Conway and Briner 2009, p. 42).

3.2. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: A CONTENT AND NATURE BASED EVALUATION

The wide spectrum of psychological contract definitions (illustrated above) logically implies the existence of various concept operationalisations, as well as content- and nature-related development (Van den Brande et al 2002b). In general, this thesis-section deals with the content and nature or categorisation of the psychological contract, and – where possible – supplements this with elements that might relate to the psychological contract of Belgian IBTs.

3.2.1. THE CONTENT OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

A great deal of research has gone into the content of the psychological contract (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). This resulted – albeit without clear conformity – in a broad range of both employee and employer’s promises, obligations and expectations to forming part of the content of the contract. Kotter (1973) in this sense posited that the psychological contract can contain thousands of items; and so drawing up complete/generally acceptable lists is thus both impractical and impossible. Yet, in this thesis context – and with reference to the definition taken as a basis (see 3.1.3 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CONCEPT APPLIED IN THIS STUDY) – the content of the IBT psychological contract concerns an unrestrained amount of perceived ‘obligations’ related to the employment deal concerned.

Despite this abundance of content-related contract compositions, Conway and Briner (2009) in their work mention the study by Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) as being considered one of the most complete studies on the psychological contract, at least in content. Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) used a critical incident methodology whereby respondents (both employees and representatives of the organisation) were required to describe incidents where the conduct of the other party either exceeded their expectations entirely or was inferior to what was envisaged. With their study, a psychological contract compilation of respectively twelve and seven categories (consisting of distinct partial items) of organisational and employee obligations was achieved (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Freese and Schalk 2008). The content-contract components – as reflected in the table below (table 3) – were identified by both a UK employee population and management/organisational representatives; yet based on another frequency, i.e. with various values in importance level (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Conway and Briner 2009):

Table 3: *the content of the psychological contract in the UK (adapted from Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997), Freese (2007) and Conway and Briner (2009))*

| EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training ▪ Fairness (of selection, appraisal, promotion and redundancy procedures) ▪ Flexibility around employee (personal/family) needs ▪ Consulting and communicating with employees ▪ Job discretion ▪ Humanity: acting in a personally and socially responsible and supportive way towards employees ▪ Recognition ▪ Safe work environment ▪ Justice (in the application of rules and disciplinary procedures) ▪ Equitable pay ▪ Benefits: consistency and fairness ▪ Job security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work contracted hours ▪ Produce good work (in terms of quality and quantity) ▪ Honesty ▪ Loyalty ▪ Take care of the organisation's property ▪ Appropriate self-presentation ▪ Flexibility: willing to go beyond one's job descriptions |

Numerous, and in particular quantitatively tinted, psychological contract studies turn to previously used (and thus also the abovementioned) content-related contract constructs (Freese and Schalk 2008). Variation in contract-measuring instruments concerns mainly the number of or composition of items in different scales (Freese and Schalk 2008; Conway and Briner 2009).

The divergence for the most part exists with the employer obligations that logically differ according the organisational setting and across nations (Rousseau and Schalk 2005; Freese and Schalk 2008). For example, in the domain of employer obligations and within a Belgian research context, De Vos, Buyens and Schalk (2003) mark the following clusters: career development, job content, social atmosphere, financial rewards and work-life balance. Employee obligations are – as also defined by De Vos, Buyens and Schalk (2003) yet in literature less researched (Freese and Schalk 2008) –

separated in: in- and extra-role behaviour, flexibility, ethical behaviour, loyalty and employability. The aforementioned contract items were developed with, amongst other things, reference to the work of Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997), and are thus not be deemed as entirely deviating or new. After all, rarely – stated accordingly by Freese and Schalk (2008) – do entirely new or deviating items and categories arise – as far as content is concerned. Exceptions on this subject are study scenarios requiring adjusted scales of measurement for unique applications or circumstances, as can for example be found in the work of Thomas and Anderson (1998) in which they examine the psychological contract of the British army. In their comments regarding differing content-related contract instruments for determining the contract content, Freese and Schalk (2008) also report expatriates as a population to be treated specifically, and refer in particular to the work of Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) (a study which is discussed hereinafter – see 3.2.2. THE NATURE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: THE RELATIONAL AND TRANSACTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION). It can consequently be accepted that bespoke contract content is opportune, even required, for IBTs, as a non-standard yet increasingly growing labour population in the current global work context (as also applicable to expatriates (Freese and Schalk 2008)).

Notwithstanding the report by Freese and Schalk (2008) of only limited differing or new content-related contract elements in the literature (with the exception of specific populations), an attempt to determine *the* content of the psychological contract appears futile (Conway and Briner 2009). The perceived set of mutual obligations is after all far from fixed and subject to adjustment in the course of the employment relationship (Robison, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). Rousseau (1995) remarks in this regard that time may be considered as an essential (possibly the most important) cause for contract change – and this is not just because the outside world is constantly changing. Both parties' beliefs relating to the contract terms change or evolve over time due, amongst other things, to personal development and company growth or failures (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994; Rousseau 1995). With her most recent UK case study (bilaterally tinted psychological contract research), Atkinson (2007a) also illustrates that contract obligations may vary

and are dependent on the individual and the organisation. She nevertheless comments that generalisations might be arrived at in relation to obligations within organisations, although it is probable that they differ throughout organisations (Atkinson 2007a).

Acknowledging the idiosyncratic character and the context or time-dependency of the psychological contract, this study focuses on the contract content of the IBT without thereby a priori using a potentially too general content-related enumeration of contract elements as a framework for research. Using prevalent generalised definitions might also confuse the focus on the essence of the IBT psychological contract (which was not desired) (Conway and Briner 2009). Moreover, the qualitative methodology employed – taken shape from a subjectivistic research angle, as spelled out later in 4. RESEARCH DESIGN – is geared towards exploring and understanding the ‘local groundedness’ of the IBT psychological contract (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 10).

Despite the fact that the content of the Belgian IBT psychological contract is to be investigated in a non-biased and ‘free’ manner, it is nevertheless interesting to diverge somewhat to a number of studies (international and Belgian) that contain indirect references to the psychological contract content.

For instance, a study by Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) concentrates on the career aspirations of Austrian frequent business travellers. My own analysis of the research results reveals a – clearly non-exhaustive – number of specific content-related contract elements that prove to be important for the business travellers questioned. The table below (table 4) presents a summarising overview of the contract items self-discovered (and potentially infused with a degree of subjectivity) – although clearly all only employer obligations.

Table 4: *the content of the psychological contract of the Austrian frequent business traveller (adapted from Demel and Mayrhofer (2010))*

- **JOB CONTENT:** ‘getting high (internationally)’
 - new and interesting tasks to be fulfilled
 - internationality
- **HIERARCHICAL ADVANCEMENT:** ‘getting ahead’
- **ABILITY TO BALANCE WORK AND PRIVATE LIFE**
- **LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT,** in particular: general knowledge and skills development through learning
- **NETWORKING:** ‘getting in contact’ and exchanging thoughts or ideas with others (colleagues, clients, ...)
- **MONEY AND WEALTH:** receiving a satisfying remuneration and affording a relatively up-market standard of living

Based on the – interpreted – discussion described in the work of Demel and Mayrhofer (2010), the employer obligations listed in the above table (table 4) appear in order of importance expressed.

The NETWORKING, ‘getting in contact’, dimension of Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) is on further analysis of the literature (somewhat indirectly and when reading between the lines) traced back to the work of Welch, Welch and Worm (2007). The authors concerned – as well as Welch and Worm (2006) – refer specifically to the importance (and in fact need) placed on the possibility of NETWORKING and PERSONAL CONTACT (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Welch, Welch and Worm (2007) also state the requirement and urgency to provide the IBT with ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT – in the broadest sense of the word – for effective, international job execution (as already touched upon earlier in this work, see 2.3. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER). Stahl et al (2009) furthermore emphasise the aspect of CAREER DEVELOPMENT (designated as ‘HIERARCHICAL ADVANCEMENT’ by Demel and Mayrhofer (2010)); however, the former authors do this in the general context of international assignments without explicitly discussing short-term travellers.

If the above-noted employer obligations – even though found to be limited – are compared with the psychological contract dimensions encountered in

research focused on Belgian employees, both similarities and contrasts can be ascertained.

In contrast with the work of Sels et al (2000), it appears that attention to financial rewards is less strikingly present amongst the business travellers' contract items. The attention to the financial aspect proves to be present in the aforementioned studies; yet not in a prevalent manner (see also the positioning of MONEY AND WEALTH in table 4 as the final employer obligation). Sels et al (2000) report very explicitly that Belgian employees are characterised by a strong work and salary orientation: 'Belgians are in the first place working for money...' (Sels et al 2000, p. 59). The authors furthermore add that over time, having a good relationship with colleagues has become important within the psychological contract formation, but that the salary obligation still takes priority. On the contrary, De Vos and Meganck (2009) refer in their more recently conducted Belgian mixed methods study to the limited, but nevertheless existing value assessment that Belgian professionals award to 'financial rewards' as a cluster in their psychological contract. This consequently counters the monetary focus found by Sels et al (2000). However, the employees questioned in the study of De Vos and Meganck (2009) indicated that they value the social atmosphere (good work climate/collaboration with colleagues) as most important employer inducement in their working relationship followed by their job content – both factors which are recognised as important in the travellers' psychological contract too (the one being more explicit than the other) (Demel and Mayrhofer 2010). The size of the sample/data used in the study of De Vos and Meganck (2009) – more specifically: 5,286 (usable/valid) questionnaires – could increase (disputable, yet worth mentioning) the generalist and founded character of the achieved results and consequently decrease the significance of the monetary aspect within the Belgian psychological contract. Comparable/related psychological contract research, also seen within an international survey range, is after all based on markedly smaller (interviewed) populations (at least based on data mentioned by Bal et al (2008) and Conway and Briner (2009)). However, merely stating that 'financial rewards' do not constitute any aspect or an unimportant aspect in

the Belgian psychological contract and by extension the Belgian IBT contract would be incorrect and rash. After all, Shaffer et al (2012) remark that apart from their enjoyment expectations linked to global work, internationally working professionals can also be influenced and motivated by extrinsic monetary incentives. Moreover and concretely referring back to the study of De Vos and Meganck (2009), when the concept of the psychological contract is studied more closely, the valid character of the study is brought into doubt (at least for the aspect of the study concerned). The psychological contract scale cited (coming from the study by De Vos, Buyens and Schalk (2003)) appears not to correspond with that which is reported in the article by De Vos and Meganck (2009); the scale referred to contains 19 items divided into five dimensions in a statistically sound manner. De Vos and Meganck (2009, p. 51) mention 20 inducements to be evaluated and for validity tests relating to this measurement standard make reference to the work of De Vos, Buyens and Schalk (2003) – despite the (supposition of) non-identical measuring instruments. For various reasons, the critical comment above may purely involve an oversight on the part of the writers and/or reviewers. However, given the missing detail study information, no solid verdict can be given in this respect. With regard to the validity of the present study, it would also be incorrect based on the results of the study by De Vos and Meganck (2009) to draw conclusions concerning the content of the psychological contract of the Belgian professional, given that strictly speaking the main focus of the study was not on an analysis of the psychological contract, but rather on HR managers' and employees' views on retention management, from a psychological contract perspective. In addition, the value/importance for the contract item 'social atmosphere' (deemed by De Vos and Meganck (2009) as of primary importance) is assumed to decrease when the study by De Hauw and De Vos (2010) is applied. The latter-mentioned authors indicate in their work that in times of recession (as is the case in the 2013 period in which this study is situated) certain psychological contract perceptions can change; more specifically, it appears that the (Belgian) Millennial generation have lower expectations during bad economic times pertaining to work-life balance and social atmosphere, while amongst other things their financial

interest/employer obligation experienced remains retained (De Hauw and De Vos 2010).

Although it is not the intention in this study to employ a preconceived framework in order to gain insight into the IBT psychological contract content composition, the above nevertheless demonstrates the impossibility of drawing clear-cut conclusions concerning the contract content of Belgian IBTs. Only a few employer obligations noted, yet to be criticised, in literature can be stated as possibly being part of the IBT psychological contract – no study specifically focused on the IBT psychological contract content exists. In addition, the under-representation of research concerning the employee obligations within the psychological contract discourse of both Belgian and internationally active professionals is also evident. This research gap and lack of clarity therefore reinforces the need for further research and the added value of the DBA-study described here.

3.2.2. THE NATURE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: THE RELATIONAL AND TRANSACTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Further analysis of and literature on the (diversity in) psychological contract components – by inter alia MacNeil (1985) and Rousseau (1990) – indicate a specific, more defined distinction according to the contract exchange type (along with to the content approach discussed in the previous thesis section). MacNeil (1985) reasons that there are two types of psychological contracts, namely ‘relational’ and ‘transactional’ contracts (in Rousseau 1990, p. 391). The undisputed parallel with Blau’s (1964) vision of social-exchange theory – particularly with his distinction made between social and economic exchange dimensions – should be touched on in this contract-typifying context (in Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall 2008; Conway and Briner 2009; Shore, Coyle-Shapiro and Tetrick 2012).

In their recent work, various authors differentiate – content based – between relational and transactional tinted exchange relationships between employers

and employees, referring to the type of obligations included or dominating the psychological contract (see for instance: De Meuse, Bergmann and Lester (2001), Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006) and Atkinson (2007b; 2008)). Insight relating to the type of obligations results – in addition to a necessary comprehension of the essence of those obligations – in a more founded understanding of the psychological contract content. Atkinson (2007b; 2008) describes the insight in question, specifically the degree in which a contract is relational or transactional, as the ‘nature’ of the psychological contract – a term that is used in this thesis.

Referring to the work of Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994), **transactional** contracts can be considered as specific economic, monetisable, exchanges between parties over a finite mostly brief term. They are characterised by competitive wage rates and the absence of long-term commitments (Rousseau 1990; Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). **Relational** contracts, on the contrary, imply open-ended, less specific agreements that establish and maintain a relationship involving both monetisable and non-monetisable exchanges (Rousseau 1990; Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). A summarised, but general, comparison of the transactional-relational contract nature in question is given below (see table 5).

Table 5: *the transactional-relational psychological contract divide (adapted from Rousseau (1990), Freese (2007) and Conway and Briner (2009))*

| TRANSACTIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS | RELATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Short-term, time bounded promises ▪ Highly specified tangible exchange (having a monetary, economic value) ▪ Likely to be explicit and require formal agreement by both parties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Long-term, open-ended promises ▪ Loosely specified intangible exchange (likely to be socio-emotional) ▪ Implicit and unlikely to involve actual agreement by both parties |

Notwithstanding the above definition and list of features, the difference between transactional and relational contracts does not seem crystal clear and is consequently the subject of much discussion in related literature (Conway and Briner 2009). It is after all not always obvious which obligations appear with which contract categorisation (Arnold 1996 in Atkinson and Cuthbert 2006, p. 649). Despite this difficulty of assigning a relational or transactional label to obligations in a generally applicable manner, Rousseau (1990) nevertheless created a category of obligations based on empirical research with MBA students and an integrated canonical analysis. In her opinion, an employment relationship in which job security and loyalty (as employer and employee obligations respectively) are central indicates the presence of a relational psychological contract (Rousseau 1990; Van den Brande et al 2002b). Within a transactional contract nature, hard work is exchanged for a high salary and for career opportunities (Rousseau 1990; Van den Brande et al 2002b). In a second investigation in which Rousseau participated that took place two years later, the same MBA graduates were again questioned on their perceived employer and employee obligations (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). The new subdivision of obligations obtained – followed by and used as a basis in the work of Atkinson (2007b) – can be presented graphically as followed (see [table 6](#)):

Table 6: *the psychological contract dimensions (reproduced from Atkinson (2007b))*

| TRANSACTIONAL EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | TRANSACTIONAL EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS | RELATIONAL EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | RELATIONAL EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advancement ▪ High pay ▪ Merit pay | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Notice ▪ Transfers ▪ No competitor support ▪ Proprietary protection ▪ Minimum stay | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training ▪ Job security ▪ Development ▪ Support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overtime ▪ Loyalty ▪ Extra-role behaviour |

However, neither the distinction made by Rousseau (1990) nor the distinction by Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) depicted above are accepted as stable or generally applicable standards (Van den Brande et al 2002b; Atkinson 2007b). Contradictions regarding the categorisation of obligations can be found in the literature – also in the aforementioned works (Van den Brande et al 2002b). A practical illustration of these contradictions emerges for example with the comparison of categorisation of the item ‘training’. In the study by Rousseau (1990) training loads with a transactional contract pattern (from the employer obligations perspective); Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) present the item as a relational contract identification. Various other examples can be cited in connection with this. Nonetheless, given the subjectivistic interpretive focus of this study, it was/is not in fact felt to be unusual that certain obligations might have a different interpretation and differ in essence. As a consequence, no further attention is paid to differences in interpretation such as these.

Besides the various viewpoints concerning the categorisation of obligations, a discussion can also be found in the literature on whether relational and transactional contracts should be viewed as opposites, or whether they can exist beside each other (Conway and Briner 2009). Rousseau (1990) responds to this issue by proposing that transactional and relational contracts should be considered as opposite ends of one continuum of contract

arrangements. This specifically means that the more contracts become transactional, the less they become relational, and vice versa (Conway and Briner 2009).

Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) distance themselves from the idea that the above-explicated forms of contract (relational/transactional) constitute a single continuum; they suggest transactional and relational contract orientations as basically independent dimensions which may vary freely with respect to each other and may be present together simultaneously in one contract relationship. The authors go a step further and identify a third contract dimension in their study, called 'training obligations', without however wanting to generalise this as generally applicable, considering that their study relates to a specific population (more in particular employees of UK public companies) (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000).

In this context, Rousseau (2000) also adds with her later work a supplementary new dimension apart from the relational and transactional exchange differentiation, specifically: 'balanced contracts'. Balanced contracts combine an open-ended, dynamic, relational psychological contract focus with the transactional characteristic of pronounced individual and organisation related performance based compensation where both employee and employer contribute to each other's development (Rousseau 2000). In addition, Rousseau (2000) as well as Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004, p. 312) report 'transitional arrangements'; thereby referring to a lack of agreement between the parties, as for instance might arise in unstable circumstances of radical change.

Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande (2004) furthermore suggest abandoning the transactional/relational distinction entirely, since identifying contracts only on two dimensions potentially excludes other types of contract. On the basis of research within a Belgian population of 1,106 professionals, the authors in question arrive at six contract types based on six features or underlying contract dimensions, namely: the unattached, weak, instrumental, loyal, investing and strong psychological contract (Janssens, Sels and Van den

Brande 2003; Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande 2004). As far as this approach is concerned and notwithstanding its potential link or relevance with the Belgian research context of this study, it is not dealt with further in this study seeing that the contribution of use of this contract assessment method lies in the generalisability of findings across contexts (Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande 2004). Such an approach does not tie up with the study objectives anticipated here (see as above 1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES and 4. RESEARCH DESIGN).

Despite the recently emerging diversification in psychological contract typology or nature (as put across concisely above), the differentiation between or at least the prototypical description of relational and transactional contract-extent still appears to be acceptable and agreed upon (De Cuyper et al 2008; Conway and Briner 2009). However the relevant differentiation is adjustable or possibly to be interpreted differently depending on the context of the application/study (Sels, Janssens and Van den Brande 2004). Hence, this study upholds the terms relational and transactional originally established by Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) (and used for example in the work of Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006) and Atkinson (2007b)) pertaining to the contract nature. The terms are applied knowing that the/any practical research results cannot just be subdivided in a category without interpretation. The various categories of obligations being together in one contract is also accepted and tolerated, as can be found in literature/in the work of Atkinson referred to above, amongst others. It is therefore argued in this exploratory study that the distinction between a relational and transactional contract (element) in the specific IBT employment relationship should be data driven and is highly dependent of the not to be generalised (personal) interpretation of the data shared.

Aside from the discussion, yet from the viewpoint assumed, regarding the dual contract nature subdivision (transactional/relational), in the present literature investigation theoretical indications concerning the IBT contract nature are furthermore sought, so as to be able to compare the findings (later

in this work) with the study results encountered in literature. However, since there is a lack of study with regard to the psychological contract of the Belgian IBT, for relevant background information with regard to the nature of the contract one must refer – as is done below – to international studies related primarily to expatriates' psychological contracts and literature in which psychological contract trends are studied (where possible, from a Belgian context).

A review of the literature reveals that the psychological contract within an expatriate context has recently been coming increasingly under the attention of research. Still, there only appears to be a limited amount of research specifically relating to the nature of the expatriate psychological contract. Reference can nevertheless be made to a number of explanatory articles, elaborated at various periods of time. Two studies carried out in the 1990s – based on the one hand on a quantitative and on the other a phenomenological approach (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997) – provided a first glance at the expatriate psychological contract.

Using questionnaires, Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) investigated HR company policy in US organisations towards expatriates, and how such policy had an impact on retention-related outcomes, with the psychological contract as a relationship-mediating factor. The research covered a relatively large geographical area, with a sample of 148 expatriates (from 43 companies) employed in 36 different countries, and the authors involved (as well as Pate and Scullion (2010) later) thus considered the study as indicative/valid (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994). In contrast, the work of Lewis (1997) concerns a qualitative explanation regarding a breakdown model for gaining insight into expatriate needs and expectations, in order to detect potential assignment problems. Lewis (1997) used a limited data-set (in comparison with Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994)) which was analysed through descriptive narration and obtained from semi-structured interviews with eight expatriates/ex-expatriates working in four UK companies.

Despite the different study design, the abovementioned works refer to the nature of the contract in an identical manner. Both works endorse the view that an expatriate's psychological contract differs from that of the same worker employed in his/her own country (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997). After all, expats are leaving behind a 'lifetime's history of family, friends, hobbies and interests' (Lewis 1997, p. 280). The authors indicate concretely that the expatriate psychological contract can be seen as rather broad and relational (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997). The fact that within an expat job both work and non-work conditions are subject to the employer's influence explains the argued contract nature (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997). Almost all aspects of the daily expatriate life are – as reported by Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) – open to the employers' influence, an employing organisation with which there appears to be a strong bond. In an expat context, the employer is not only the source of income, but also a source of support in, for example, looking for schools for children (if applicable), finding/providing somewhere to live, and various other services (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994). Logically there are quantifiable, tangible aspects linked to the job contract (e.g. agreements on minimising tax burdens on the foreign income) which yet co-exist with the numerous intangible job perceptions, like for example – in addition to the aforementioned – certain/secure career expectations or the significance attached to accountabilities pertaining to safety (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997).

However, the relational nature of the expatriate psychological contract (proposed in the studies by Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) and Lewis (1997)) cannot be supported without discussion, or simply be transposed to an IBT or not-long term international work context as discussed in what follows.

For example, Baruch and Altman (2002) mention that expatriate psychological contract literature (also, amongst others, referring to the work of Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994)) pays little attention to the intentions that organisations have with expatriation, especially in changing circumstances

and times. Differing assignment-purposes might have an impact on the contract nature (as also discussed by Stahl et al 2009). As a result, change from a long-term to a short-term assignment focus could entail an altered contract nature. This could subsequently be a reason why an IBT psychological contract might be different in nature than that of expatriates.

It should furthermore be noted that a shift away from relational psychological contracts is discernible in the related literature, which goes hand in hand with the established changes in the economic environment such as increased international competition, lower growth, essential cost reduction amongst companies, etc. (Hiltrop 1996). In this context and in the same time period as the expatriate work commented on above, Rousseau (1995, p. 110) has referred to the 'dead' of the old, purely relational psychological contract.

Hiltrop (1996) concentrated on describing the new (transformed) psychological contract by interviewing middle managers who participated in a workshop at the International Institute for Management in Lausanne. The core terms mentioned to be related to the old contract were: stability, permanence, predictability, fairness, tradition, and mutual respect; in contrast, the new contract was considered as primarily a short-term relationship, with the emphasis on flexibility, self-reliance and achieving immediate results (Hiltrop 1996). Within this altered working relationship, employees are supposed to be responsible for their own career development and commitment to the job or organisation has been replaced by commitment to the specific work performed (Cavanaugh and Noe 1999). These new indicated psychological contracts could thus be considered as moving to the transactional contract side direction.

De Meuse, Bergmann and Lester (2001) investigated more recently the proposed relational-transactional contract shift by studying the perceptions of three generations across four time periods (with the fourth being the future). Their empirical work reveals a changing and dynamic relationship between employees and their employing organisation, which is characterised by increasingly eroding perceptions regarding relational contract components

(De Meuse, Bergmann and Lester 2001). This less-relational transition involves – according to Yan, Zhu and Hall (2002) – a more learning oriented and project based contract focus with reduced consideration to loyalty. In accordance with and with reference to the study reported earlier in this work by Meyskens et al (2009), a project-based attitude such as this leans rather heavily on IBTs' function performance, which is sometimes/can be project based (see 2.3. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER). It is thus consequently not unacceptable that the IBT psychological contract would follow the evolution toward a less relationally focused contract. This shift is additionally emphasised within the current, increasingly more competitive and broadening Belgian market (FEB-VBO et al 2012), especially since economic circumstances such as these are cited as a principal explanation for the ever-more present transactional and individualistic working relationships (De Meuse, Bergmann and Lester 2001; Pate and Scullion 2010).

Pate and Scullion (2010) proceed along this transactional line of thought and challenge with their work – a multiple and bilaterally tinted case-study investigation – the relational labelling of the expatriate psychological contract. Apart from the open-ended employment (as a relational contract aspect) and the high autonomy characteristic of an expatriate assignment, Pate and Scullion (2010) remark that from an employer's perspective, a very clear transactional contract tone emerged in their inquiry. The specific contract terms, conditions and duration seemed to be fixed and drawn up to benefit the organisation for which a more stringent policy could also be observed (Pate and Scullion 2010). This contradicts the previous study findings and strictly relational contract categorisation of Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) and Lewis (1997). Despite this transactionally tinted employer's perspective, the expatriates/employees interviewed did to some extent, on a superficial level, call on the – above quoted – relational psychological contract focus: security in terms of promotion upon return as well as recognition of skills development were highly anticipated (Pate and Scullion 2010). A strong transactional contract flavour was nevertheless also expressed in terms of increased, more aggressive/critical, negotiation in contract drafting and a less reliant attitude towards one organisation; without claiming the contract to be

generally and purely transactional, given the diversity in individual and context dependent contract interpretation (Pate and Scullion 2010).

Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson (2005, p. 341) as well as Stahl et al (2009) follow in their work the transactional contract orientation when they speak of their 'boundaryless careerists'. The researchers consider the psychological contract of the boundaryless careerists – defined as 'highly qualified mobile professionals who develop their career competence levels and market value through continuous learning and transfer across borders' – as economically tinted (Stahl et al 2009, p. 92). The abovementioned authors' ideas stem from and are based on the fact that society has today evolved into a flexible economy, whereby boundaries (between both organisations and countries) are becoming more permeable (Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson 2005). In this context, careers should be viewed from another perspective: employees should become boundaryless by acquiring the necessary movable or transferable skills; in this regard, the responsibility for career development is therefore transferred from the organisation to the individual, as is supposed in the transactional psychological contract (Cavanaugh and Noe 1999; Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson 2005).

Elaborating on the aforementioned (and referring to the first section of this literature review, 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVEL), it could be assumed and supported that the IBT psychological contract evolves in such an increasingly less relational (more abstract) deal. The flexible nature with which the IBT employment relationship is characterised, the current business context which is in continual change as well as the impact/input of the individual (and not the employer-employee partnership) on determining the success of the assignments could all be considered as factors strengthening the contract shift.

However, accepting the assumption where the employment deal of the IBT is considered to be transactional (or at least moving in a more transactional direction) is questionable. When Belgian psychological contract research is examined – relevant for this study since IBTs are being approached/studied

from a Belgian context – marginal notes with the transactional categorisation trend can be made that should be taken into consideration in order to understand the essence of that which is being studied.

Sels et al (2000) report in their study that the direction towards transactional psychological contracts does not line up with the related practice in Belgium. The context specificity and Belgian culture imply after all psychological contracts that contain both relational and transactional elements: the striving towards individualism and the focus on monetary compensation is balanced by the upholding of the collective negotiated rules and the need for security or belonging (Sels et al 2000). This paradox (as dealt with earlier in this work, for this see 1.3. THE BELGIAN RESEARCH CONTEXT) prevents the psychological contract being categorised in an undisguised way, despite the clear importance of the financial aspect with employment (Sels et al 2000). This 'in-between' Belgian contract nature is figuratively yet aptly described as follows: 'The moderate climate seems to reflect their [Belgians'] approach to life: the middle road between extremes' (Gannon 1994 in Sels et al 2000, p. 59).

The Belgian non-distinct contract nature can also be found in the work of De Cuyper et al (2008); for permanent (in other words not temporary) employees, high values were noted both for transactional and relational employee and employer obligations. However, Belgian and German employees were combined in the study under the statement that both the countries are characterised by comparable economic dimensions that would shape the employees' psychological contract in a similar way (De Cuyper et al 2008). This approach can be disputed considering that it already appears difficult to draw up a single psychological contract for one population (as illustrated in the study by Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006), amongst others).

A further, more distinct, insight on the Belgian psychological contract can, indirectly, be found in the work of Soens et al (2005). Their research, with the aim of charting Belgian careers, demonstrates that within this Belgian

employee population, the traditional career marked by a traditional psychological contract still occupies a dominant role. Belgian employees have a preference for a permanent, stable and full-time employment deal (Soens et al 2005). In the Belgian context studied, the 'old' psychological contract consequently turns out not be entirely 'dead' (Rousseau 1995, p. 110). Nevertheless, the reality and emergence of new, diverse and transitional career-related trends is observed – through various societal factors and with highly educated employees, amongst others (Soens et al 2005). Erosion of the strictly relational and non-individual career is then somewhat acknowledged and likewise enhanced if the work of Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans (2005) is espoused. Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans (2005) concentrate on the development policy of Belgian companies (and the characteristics of these companies) in relation to their high potential employees. With their survey, the authors illustrate that HR policies of Belgian (Flemish) companies (for the development of high potentials) are of a rather ad hoc nature, but that the individuals concerned do get a say in it, which tends towards a transactional contract flavour (Cavanaugh and Noe 1999; Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans 2005). However, career elements such as attention to performance, marketability and identification with a job (instead of the organisation) appear to be less-developed policy components within Belgian companies notwithstanding their increasing importance and frequent occurrence (Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans 2005). Van den Brande et al (2002c) likewise remark in their study – yet only focused on Flemish employees and executed earlier than the one of Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans (2005) – that one out of five employees still holds on to a loyal or old contract with their employer. The conclusion of the researchers is that the so-called transformation from traditional employment relationships towards 'new deals' is restricted to a very small group of young and highly educated professionals (referred to as high potentials in the study of Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans (2005)) (Van den Brande et al 2002c, p. 174).

Based on the above contrasts, it can be stated with certainty that further study on the psychological contract of Belgian IBTs is appropriate. Given the

cited, non-concluded field of tension between the findings in literature, it appears necessary to verify the extent to which the less relational shift from the psychological contract has actually taken place or is taking place in the Belgian IBT context (being studied here). After all, from an international point of view it can be accepted that the IBT contract is rather transactionally tinted – rereading Belgian psychological contract research on this makes this assumption uncertain (especially being unaware if IBTs could be considered as belonging to the group of highly educated Belgian employees or high potentials). The old relational contract turns out not yet to have disappeared entirely from the spotlight. An ascertainment such as this is nevertheless not a total surprise. Rousseau and Schalk (2005) comment in their work that it would be too simplistic to consider the transactional contract as *the* contract of the future, without ignoring the evolution into more negotiated contract deals. Local values and related interpretations can provide other opinions on identical practices (Rousseau and Schalk 2005). In this same context, although in a UK-study context, Sturges et al (2005) found that there are still employees in the ‘new deal’ work environment who nowadays attach value to and require traditional relational contract elements. As a result, it appears admissible that within a Belgian IBT population, a degree of preference for a relational psychological contract would be noted in a global, continuously changing, working world steeped in transactional elements and characterised by self-management.

3.3. THE STATE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

So as to investigate and subsequently understand the psychological contract in a comprehensive manner, along with the research into the contract content and nature (explicated in the preceding sections of this chapter), it is also opportune to perform an evaluation-oriented subject analysis (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). An analysis such as this, referred to here as the ‘state’ of the psychological contract, involves an assessment concerning the ‘delivery of the deal’ or with other words a judgment regarding a party’s actual experience relative to an existing psychological contract (Guest 1998a, p. 61;

Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). In what follows, a general view on the state of the psychological contract is provided. With this it is also attempted, where possible, to direct attention to the IBT contract state (yet taking into consideration that academic analysis focussing on the state of the IBT contract is non-existent).

The state of the psychological contract will in this study be investigated by examining the extent to which the psychological contract is breached or fulfilled, respectively indicating a negative and positive contract state (Guest and Conway 2002).

Psychological contract **breach** occurs if 'one party in a relationship gains the perception that another has failed to fulfil promised obligation(s)' (Robinson and Rousseau 1994, p. 247). Although this definition of breach was initially used as a description of *violation*, it nevertheless corresponds with what in later studies and above all with the term-distinguishing work of Morrison and Robinson (1997) was considered as *breach* (Conway, Guest and Trenberth 2011). Notwithstanding the fact that contract violation and breach seem to be used interchangeably in the relevant literature, the former concept refers to the emotional and affective state that may – but does not always – follow on from cognition of breach (Van den Brande et al 2002b; Zhao et al 2007, p. 649; Conway and Briner 2009). With this work the distinction of terms is followed and interpreted in that sense.

Fulfilment concerns the sensed agreement between the 'actual delivery' and the ideal deal – which is not considered as neutral but as positive; a fulfilled contract can thus contribute toward a positive contract state (Tornikoski 2011).

Within related and most empirical work, breach and fulfilment are seen as opposite poles lying on a single continuum (Conway and Briner 2009; Conway, Guest and Trenberth 2011). Some authors add an extra concept to the continuum and expand its ranging from breach, fulfilment to over-fulfilment (Tornikoski 2011). Over-fulfilment is then understood as 'a value

judgement whereby previous transactions are perceived as exceeding the promised obligations' (Tornikoski 2011, p. 218). Other authors – amongst them Conway, Guest and Trenberth (2001) – state that breach and fulfilment cannot merely be considered as opposites on the same continuum, given their different effects and outcomes. For this research project, it is supposed that breach and fulfilment perceptions may vary according to the psychological contract element under consideration – a psychological contract may, in this viewpoint, thus contain a combination of breached and fulfilled (possibly over-fulfilled) items. This 'unrestricted' supposition is accepted and appropriate so as to be able to delve deeper – with the help of a qualitative research approach – into the true state of the psychological contract. The application of breach/fulfilment at obligation level (instead of related to the entire contract) is also/amongst other things encountered in the work of Atkinson (2007b).

Furthermore, this study's interest in the state of the psychological contract is limited up to point of the employee. As stated earlier in this work, the sample of this study only lends itself to approaching the psychological contract breach and fulfilment/over-fulfilment from the point of view of the employee (the IBT) without wishing to undermine the interesting nature of bilateral research. This research perspective is nevertheless neither ground-breaking nor unusual. Research on breach and fulfilment of the psychological contract appears principally to focus on a unilateral concept definition; attention is mainly on the employee's view (Guest 1998a; Van den Brande et al 2002b; Conway and Briner 2009).

In order to comprehend the 'breach' concept in full reference can be made to Robinson and Morrison (2000), who identify two principal reasons for – as well as types of – contract breach. According to them – although here translated in broad terms – there may on the one hand be 'reneging' or 'real breach' whereby one of the contract parties (in this study the employers) do not observe their obligations; while on the other hand the understanding between the parties in relation to contract obligations might differ (referred to as 'incongruence' or 'perceived breach') (Robinson 1996, p. 576; Robinson

and Morrison 2000, p. 526). As proposed by Morrison and Robinson (1997) and Robinson and Morrison (2000), contract breach (reneging) occurs in the situation where the organisation is unable to observe its obligations, as well as where it is unwilling to observe them. Incongruence results from various cognitive perceptions on the general expectations of the employer/employee relationship, the complexity of expectations and the lack of communication in this regard (Morrison and Robinson 1997; Robinson and Morrison 2000). Perceived breach can consequently occur without any actual breach situation arising (Robinson 1996). However, whether the breach is effectively genuine or perceived, its potential consequences in fact remain the same (Robinson and Morrison 2000). Therefore, in the further course of this thesis no strict distinction of terms is used.

In addition to reneging and incongruence as an identified cause of breach, it should also be remarked that the degree of employee alertness determines to a great extent whether employees believe their psychological contract to be breached (Robinson and Morrison 2000). In other words, experiencing a discrepancy in contract fulfilment depends on the level at which employees monitor and evaluate their organisation on complying with its obligations (Morrison and Robinson 1997). Referring to the section described above concerning contract nature (3.2. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: A CONTENT AND NATURE BASED EVALUATION), Morrison and Robinson (1997) propose that employees with transactional contracts are more focused on scanning their organisation in terms of observing obligations. The transactional contract focus found in international literature could thus consequently imply/stimulate a breach experience amongst IBTs. However, in view of the impossibility – also reported – of strictly labelling the IBT contract, the aforementioned idea should be interpreted with a certain degree of caution.

Other antecedents or influencers for psychological contract breach, recently investigated yet not summarised exhaustively concern for example inadequate human resources management practices (Guest and Conway 2004; Conway and Briner 2009) or a lack of organisation support perceived

by employees (Tekleab, Takeuchi and Taylor 2005). Knowing that and as already noted earlier in this work (see 2.3. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER) that HR is at the start of the 'learning curve' in relation to managing non-standard international projects, plus that the vital role of the IBT is not/too little recognised by the HR representatives concerned, it seems (more firmly stated than the aforementioned link) of importance to gain an insight on the state of the IBT contract (Mayerhofer et al 2004; Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005, p. 671; Welch and Worm 2006; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007; Stroh et al 2008; Beaverstock et al 2009; Demel and Mayrhofer 2010). Breach-stimulating factors/situations such as these logically increase the chance of breach; its potential outcomes may then ultimately impede or block results-oriented or long-term function performance.

The consequences of psychological contract breach are after all diverse and differ from the consequences of contract fulfilment. In any way breach is assigned a 'quasi-irreversible' character (Rousseau 1998, p. 129) and appears – as measured empirically by Conway and Briner (2002) and Conway, Guest and Trenberth (2011) – to have a more damaging and significantly stronger effect on various work and/or emotion-related outcomes than the effect that fulfilment has. The degree to which psychological contract item fulfilment can lead to positive attitudes or work behaviour is found to be unclear – possibly/partly also to be explained by the extremely limited research in this domain (Conway, Guest and Trenberth 2011). On the contrary, employees who feel that their contract has been breached, show – largely confirmed and supported by empirical evidence – to their employer (contract-partner) amongst other things reduced organisational commitment and enthusiasm, indicate an attitude of job dissatisfaction or/as well as a certain cynicism aimed at the organisation, etc. (e.g. Robinson and Rousseau (1994), Conway and Briner (2002), Lester et al (2002), Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly (2003), etc.). An out-of-balance exchange relationship has, in general/as revealed by various studies, along with a resulting emotional reaction (violation) an unfavourable impact on work behaviour and the attitudes related to it (Zhao et al 2007; Conway and Briner 2009). The impact relationship between psychological contract breach and turnover intentions

(as strongest precursor of actual turnover and thus indication of psychological contract ending (Freese 2007)) appears significant too in this regard.

Research furthermore demonstrates that outcomes of breach can vary according to contract nature (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) propose that breaches of relational obligations have a stronger effect than transactional ones, given that employees in a relational contract bond place emphasis on the relationship itself (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994; Robinson and Rousseau 1994). More recently, this vision is nevertheless not viewed in the literature as being generally applicable and always followed. Robinson and Morrison (2000) (with their study questioning 147 MBA graduates) did not find that the implicitness of promises – or the promises that make up relational contracts – significantly related to perceived contract breach. In this context, Zhao et al (2007) likewise refer to being cautious about suggesting moderating effects in general on the breach-outcome relationship, based on psychological contract content. This is because their meta-analysis – not hypothetically supposed – reveals that transactional contract-content breach has a heavily moderating influence (greater than relational breach) on organisational commitment, but not on for example job satisfaction, turnover and organisational citizenship behaviour (Zhao et al 2007).

Based on the above, the ambiguity and contradictory influences/connections between psychological contract nature, breach and its consequences impede thus drawing a straightforward conclusion regarding the connection between the psychological contract distinctiveness and its state. Nevertheless, an understanding of the psychological contract nature, the (positive/negative) state of contract and the association with certain work outcomes consequently prove to be very handy for organisations that employ IBTs characterised by extensive and strategic accountabilities (Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Loss of motivation, loss of function or reduced work performance by IBTs (or at least the increased probability thereof) would threaten amongst other things the necessary knowledge-spread, market

exploration, trouble shooting, etc. in globally operating businesses with the resulting negative or progress inhibiting business consequences (Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007). Moreover, achieving insight in the IBT's – or in general the employee's – psychological contract state appears to be of strong value considering that based on reviewing the existing research – psychological contract breaches are the norm rather than the exception (Van den Brande et al 2002b).

Robinson and Rousseau (1994) already claimed this 'norm-manifestation' in their study whereby around 55 per cent of recently employed MBA graduates indicated a contract breach in the first two years of employment. Through their survey of both organisation agents and employees, Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) demonstrate that both groups evaluate the fulfilment of contract obligations by the organisation as needing improvement, although in different degrees. More recently, Conway and Briner (2002) likewise illustrate with their daily diary study that 69 per cent of employees participating in the research reported at least one broken organisation promise in a ten-day period. The works cited previously in this section relating to the expatriate psychological contract also mention forms of breach experiences. For instance, Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) demonstrate that the fulfilment of employer provisions relating to financial inducements, general and family support of the questioned expatriates feel somewhat low to lower than they had expected; which according to the authors indicates on a non-fulfilled psychological contract. Pate and Scullion (2010, pp. 65-66) furthermore report that within their research sample, expatriates are 'dissatisfied' in relation to how their organisation managed an overseas experience, as well as 'frustrated' regarding the outcome and the repatriation process. In their study, Paik, Segoud and Malinowski (2002) also discuss the divergence between expatriates' motivation and expectations and those of their organisation (organisations with a head office in the US, Finland, Scandinavia and the UK). Interviews with expatriates and HR representatives revealed that expatriates accept their assignments for an expected career progression, the compensation/salary and the adventure; in contrast, the organisation views engaging expatriates rather as a necessary transfer of

knowledge, and a means of responding to project objectives in an increasingly global market (Paik, Segoud and Malinowski 2002). Discrepancy such as this is cited as a cause for conflicts, unfulfilled expectations/obligations and assignment repatriation, which in terms of this study could refer to a breached/broken psychological contract with related outcomes (Paik, Segoud and Malinowski 2002).

Given that breach experiences or negative contract statuses are reported in diverse studies including research relating to expatriates, it appears acceptable to suppose that the IBTs of this study will also have or had previously perceived breach experiences. This presumption is fortified when referring to the work of Pate (2006), in which it is indicated that occasional breach might be more common than a positive contract state within a challenging and complex business environment as is today's global economy. However simply supposing that a breached contract is the norm is incorrect, or at least open to discussion. Just as studies concerning contract breach are encountered, contract fulfilment and the positivity surrounding this has also been studied. Lester et al (2002) for instance conclude – in their study performed within the US health sector – that all in all, the majority of employees receive as much as they were promised by their organisation. In addition to this, Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006) observed a reasonably positive psychological contract amongst the UK working population forming part of the research executed. Both fulfilled and unfulfilled psychological contract items are also noticed in the study by De Vos and Meganck (2009). The study revealed that Belgian employees are most positive about the fulfilment of promises relating to their job content and the social atmosphere (De Vos and Meganck 2009). On the contrary career development and financial rewards were mentioned as not satisfying factors in Belgians' their psychological contract (De Vos and Meganck 2009). The reported breached contract indication can be interpreted as somewhat surprising, given that in the same study HR representatives – although not associated with the employees surveyed – report that they pay great attention to career development within the scope of their organisation retention policy (De Vos and Meganck 2009). This exemplary input for policy revision highlights once

more the practical added value of psychological contract research; the importance of further insight into the state of IBT psychological contract, within a Belgian context, is consequently again underlined.

Independently of whether or not breach is viewed as a norm, it can be posited from the literature that psychological contract breach occurs frequently in a work environment, and as a result will not be unknown within the IBT business context investigated here (Conway and Briner 2009). Elements that contribute to this include – in accordance with the above – the possible transactional contract content element and the reality of limited HR support for IBTs in today's complex business environment. More focused qualitative research – as conducted with this study – is nevertheless required in order to be able to make an effective, suitable declaration regarding the specific IBT contract state.

3.4. CONCLUSION

Besides a concise general explanation of concepts, the second and concluding part of the literature study of this thesis demonstrated the lack of knowledge that currently exists in relation to the Belgian IBT psychological contract. In view of this research gap, certain suppositions concerning the contract distinctiveness and its state were voiced that are nevertheless characterised by contradictions. The contradictions encountered are logically related to the fact that diverse research published and evolving over time focussing on (primarily long-term) international assignees has been pitched against Belgian (local) psychological research.

Notwithstanding the oppositions that were found in this thesis section, insight was gained into various (possible) content-related IBT contract factors, as well as discussion concerning whether or not financial rewards represent a substantial contract element.

The path was furthermore levelled out in order assign the IBT psychological contract a transactional flavour; however, the path blithely meandering was impeded/made impossible, given the on the hand relational and on the other hand mixed Belgian link present.

The psychological contract state was touched upon in this literature investigation, as a final focus. Although – again – clear conclusions relating to the IBT contract state could not be found, the presence of breach experiences was supposed and the need for research was also demonstrated. The following section of this work specifically deals with how and from what point of view the research needed and executed has been devised.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter discusses the research design that has been adopted to address the central research question under study: **‘How do IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contract with their employers?’** A phenomenological approach has been used to explore and gain essential understanding of the related perspectives of Belgian travellers.

Various opinions can be found in the literature relating to the term ‘phenomenology’ – given that the term is extremely broad and used within various research disciplines, nonetheless without displaying any form of dominant or frequent usage in both management and human resource development studies (Gibson and Hanes 2003; Ehrich 2005; Gill 2014). Tan, Wilson and Olver (2009) consider the many forms and interpretations of phenomenology as a figurative minefield for researchers. Within this field of unequal concept definitions, this work consciously follows the principles of interpretive phenomenology for study design. Heidegger’s (2008) theories were employed for this purpose as a basis for concept exploration. The ideas of van Manen (1990) and Cope (2005) have additionally been taken as sources of scientific inspiration for elaborating the practical study and above all the analysis work.

This thesis-chapter first deals with the philosophical basis and the corresponding methodological approach of the phenomenologically tinted research applied as well as its study-appropriate nature. Further attention is given to the research units, data collection and measuring instruments as input for the data analysis. Criteria for guaranteeing the quality of study are subsequently also discussed. Certain ethical considerations that need to be reviewed are concluding the chapter.

4.1. INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT AND BASIS FOR THIS STUDY

4.1.1. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL/ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

In order to understand this or any study fully, it is fundamental to obtain insight into the preferences and philosophical assumptions of the inquirer when undertaking research (Miles and Huberman 1994). The epistemological and ontological position assumed after all influences the research process as a whole; reflectivity in this regard is consequently recommended and required, which is therefore performed in what follows (Johnson and Duberley 2010).

The researcher's **epistemological** stance (or my 'theory of knowledge') is providing 'a philosophical grounding, a view and justification for what can be regarded as knowledge' (Blaikie 1995, pp. 6-7; Crotty 2010, p. 8). The (interpretive) phenomenological perspective adopted in this study is consistent with a subjectivistic epistemology and more specifically with an interpretive framework of inquiry – as the nomenclature 'interpretive phenomenology' suggests (Burrell and Morgan 1985; Gibson and Hanes 2003; Lavery 2003; Crotty 2010). This interpretive mind-set advocates wishing to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience; in other words, what is sought is an understanding of the essence of the everyday world (Burrell and Morgan 1985; Crotty 2010). The interpretive researcher will therefore also attempt to penetrate into the everyday social world, so as to comprehend socially constructed opinions and subsequently to reconstruct these into a socio-scientific language (Blaikie 1995). The psychological contract specifically set up between two parties, an employer and employee (in accordance with the concept definition applied in this work, see 3.1.3. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CONCEPT APPLIED IN THIS STUDY) therefore corresponds with the research focus on understanding socially constructed experiences.

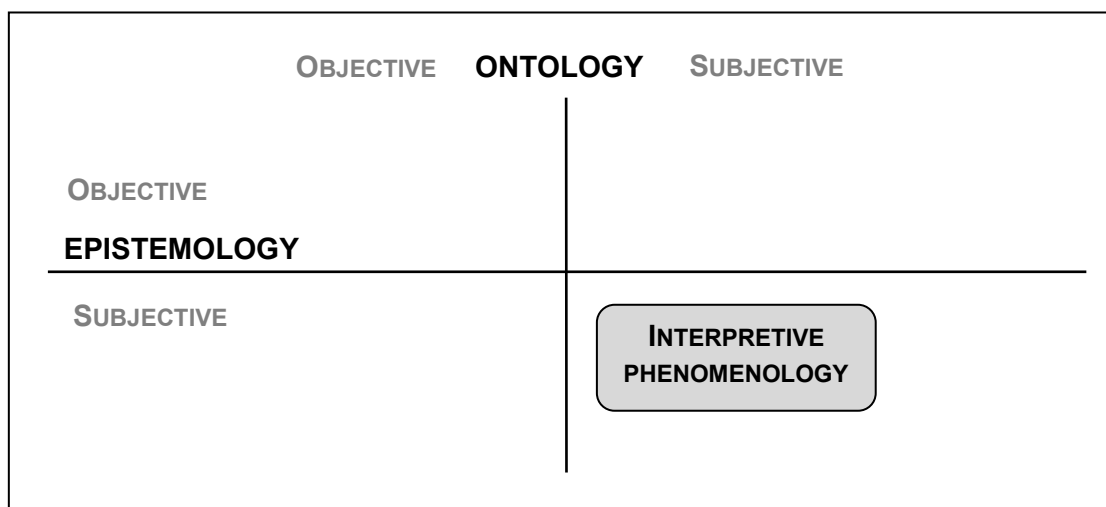
As with myself in this study, the researcher strives to become familiar with the research participant, the IBT employee, and thus to avoid distance or 'objective separateness' (Guba and Lincoln 1988 in Creswell 2007, p. 18). The interpretive framework is therefore characterised by the interactive link between the researcher and the researchee, whereby the researcher in particular acts as a 'passionate participant' (Laverty 2003, p. 13).

The understanding of what 'knowing' entails is closely related to '**ontology**', the 'study of being' or the 'claims made about the nature of social reality' – even in the sense that the concepts tend to appear together (Blaikie 1995, p. 6; Crotty 2010, p. 10). The interpretive, phenomenological, study under discussion here entails an ontology 'in which social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which actors together negotiate the meanings for action and situations' (Blaikie 1995, p. 96). This worldview is deemed cross-border with regard to an objectivist ontology, whereby 'social phenomena and their meanings have an existence independent of social actors' (Bryman and Bell 2011, p. 21). Nevertheless, in the context of HR-related research, objective findings are judged of limited value, since an ontology such as this implies a loss of vital understanding concerning the experience (and the environment) of the human world (Gibson and Hanes 2003). The ontological perspective adopted (together with the interpretive approach applied) embraces the non-existence of one reality (Burrell and Morgan 1985; Laverty 2003; Creswell 2007). Social reality is considered to have been constructed plurally, locally or specifically, and can differ according to the 'knower' (Laverty 2003, p. 13). Since every situation is different or unique and its meaning is circumstantial and co-produced, truth always has many voices (Remenyi et al 2010). The diversity in background and supposed abundance in role performance within an IBT population for example (see 2.3. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER) already paves the way for the plethora of voices – as well as the highly individualised and subjective, perception-based nature that characterises the psychological contract construct (Rousseau 1989; Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998).

The plurality mentioned is also related to and provided by the various possibilities that language use in an interpretive research stance entails (Dahlberg 2006). Articulating that which is more or less concealed in human existence generates creative opportunities for multifaceted study elaboration.¹⁰ However, the risks associated with using language must be properly taken into consideration in order not to deviate from the essence of that which is being studied. This risk is dealt with and commented on where applicable in this work, since this study has been performed in a language (namely Dutch) different from the one used to write up the study.

To summarise the above explanation concerning epistemology and ontology, the ‘paradigm’ or the ‘cluster of beliefs’ from which this study is conducted and its results should be interpreted is schematised as follows (*figure 1*) (Bryman and Bell 2011, p. 24):

Figure 1: *this study’s paradigm (adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1985), Fouweather (2010) and Wong, Musa and Wong (2011))*



¹⁰ Various authors – such as van Manen (1990) and Ehrich (2005) – in the context of this multiplicity of language refer to the use of poetry as a good/the best way to be able to represent human understanding within an interpretive phenomenological study.

4.1.2. THE PATH TO AND APPLICATION OF INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology – arising at the start of the 20th century/end of the 19th century as a reaction to the then dominant positivism – can generally be defined as the ‘reflective study of the pre-reflective or lived experience’ (van Manen 2005, p. 30).¹¹

From an etymological point of view, the term ‘phenomenology’ breaks down into two Greek reference words, namely ‘logos’ and ‘phaenesthai’ (Moustakas 1994, p. 26; Kupers 2008, p. 39). ‘Logos’ means ‘reason or word’, while ‘phaenesthai’ can be translated as ‘to show itself, to flare up, to appear’ (Moustakas 1994, p. 26; Kupers 2008, p. 390). The ‘motto’ of phenomenology can thus be summarised as follows: ‘to the things themselves’ and not to ‘the ideal form of the things themselves, because the latter does not represent how phenomena actually are in the real world’ (Moustakas 1994, p. 26; Gibson and Hanes 2003, p. 187).

The broad field of phenomenological philosophy encompasses a considerable variety of schools and streams. Merleau-Ponty (1962 in van Manen 2005, p. 30) designates phenomenology rather as ‘a way or style of thinking’ with some basic resemblance in its varieties. Lopez and Willis (2004), amongst others, nonetheless distinguish between two main phenomenological currents: a descriptive approach, which builds on the work of Husserl, and an interpretive school, which rests on the work of Heidegger.

With his transcendental or pure belief, Husserl is usually referred to as the founding father of the phenomenological tradition (Lowes and Prowse 2001;

¹¹ It should also be noted as a marginal comment that in Buddhist/Hindu philosophy, phenomenology has possibly been practiced for longer – with reference to the various stages of consciousness in meditation (Smith 2011).

Lavery 2003). Husserl (1970) rejected the notion that reliable knowledge must be acquired from a world independent from human consciousness. Transcendental or descriptive phenomenologists, inspired by Husserl, attempt scientifically to research and subsequently to describe the essence of the phenomena as they appear in our consciousness (Wonjar and Swanson 2007). So as to be able to view phenomena afresh – from a new, assumption-free, beginning – everyday understanding, knowledge and suppositions must be moved aside or ‘bracketed’ (Husserl 1970, p. 156; Moustakas 1994; van Manen 2005). This bracketing or phenomenological reduction process presumes an explicitly subjectivistic view of the world, which itself leans closely towards a rather spiritual world picture whereby pure transcendental consciousness is strived for (Burrell and Morgan 1985).¹² Husserlian phenomenology assumes then also an extremely subjective and downward-right position in the framework of paradigms illustrated above (*figure 1*) (Burrell and Morgan 1985).

Since all big trees attract the woodsman's axe, Husserl's ideas were/are challenged – in particular by Heidegger, a student of Husserl (Lopez and Willis 2004). The phenomenological reduction was heavily disapproved of by Heidegger, according to whom pure descriptions of experience from a neutral point of view are impossible (Lavery 2003; LeVasseur 2003; Lopez and Willis 2004).

Experiences are always situated and have a certain perspective – historical, personal, cultural – from which the phenomenologist, but also the research participant, are unable to escape (Lavery 2003; LeVasseur 2003; Lopez and

¹² However subsequent to Husserl's phenomenological reduction, there comes the necessary ‘reverse’ movement whereby one must return to the world as it shows itself to be in consciousness for constituting significance (van Manen 2005). This is why ‘constitutive phenomenology’ is sometimes also used as a synonym of transcendental or purely descriptive phenomenology (van Manen 2005, p. 32; Smith 2011).

Willis 2004). For Heidegger, the fact that humans 'are-in-the-world' and are unable to rid themselves of from various opinion/choice influencing contexts is central and determinant for research (Heidegger 2008). This 'human way of being-in-the-world' is formulated by Heidegger into the term 'dasein', a term introduced in his idea-elucidating work 'Being and Time' (Wonjar and Swanson 2007, p. 174; Heidegger 2008, p. 27).

Although Heidegger adhered to the basic phenomenological vision of returning to the things/facts themselves, according to him 'uninterpreted things/facts do not exist' (van Manen 1990, p. 180; Heidegger 2008). Through this specified emphasis on interpretation, Heidegger's phenomenological approach is, as a result, usually associated with the term interpretive phenomenology (van Manen 2005). The interpretation process in line with Heidegger's ideas is – contrary to what is defended by Husserl – determined by preconceptions or a certain pre-understanding held by both the researcher and researchee (Wonjar and Swanson 2007). Those so called 'forestructures of understanding' are a result of everyone's 'dasein' and situatedness (Wonjar and Swanson 2007; Heidegger 2008, p. 195). Previous (personal) experiences may determine an individual's interpretation ('fore-having'), socio-cultural backgrounds influence the position from which interpretation is performed ('fore-sight') or can also anticipate to what might be found in research ('fore-conception') (Wonjar and Swanson 2007; Heidegger 2008, p. 193).

This study is further elaborated within the interpretive¹³ phenomenological framework delineated given that essentially, and from a practical point of

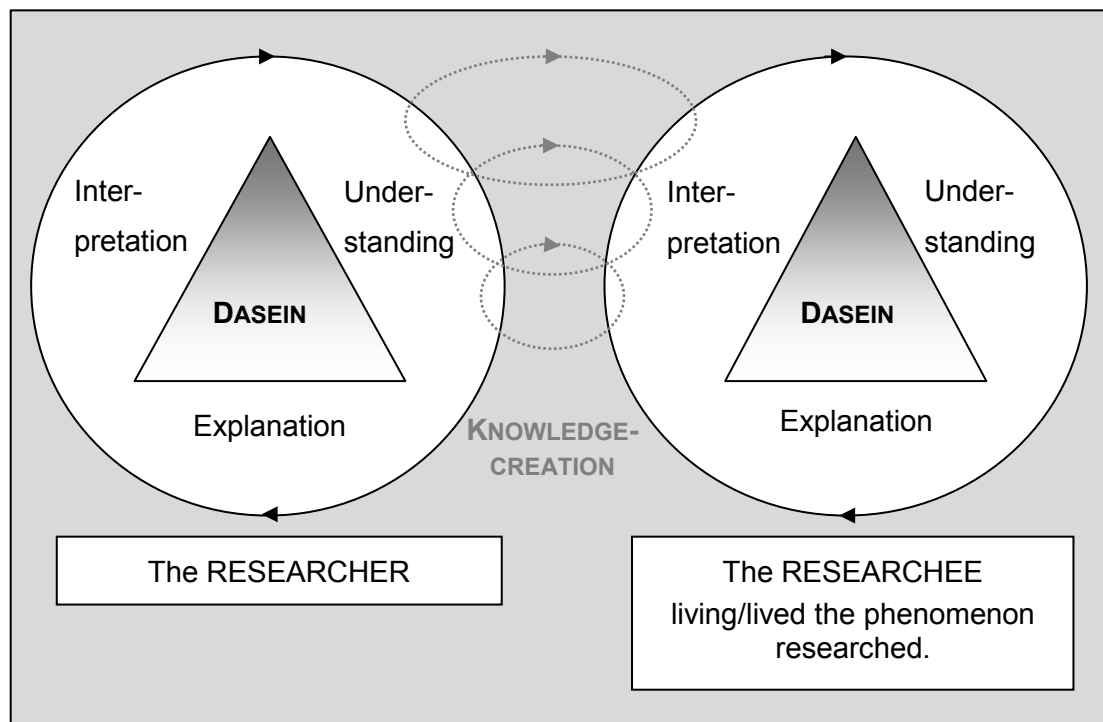
¹³ Hermeneutic phenomenology is found in literature and mostly used as a synonym for interpretive phenomenology (see Lopez and Willis (2004), van Manen (2005), Wonjar and Swanson (2007) amongst others). The word 'hermeneutic' is derived from the name 'Hermes', a Greek God who – in a mythical context – was responsible for interpreting messages between Gods (Lopez and Willis 2004). So as to avoid any confusion of concept, in that which follows only the term interpretive is

view, it proves difficult to find a correlation with the absolute requirement for bracketing within a Husserlian approach. The fact that I, as a researcher, consider the IBT psychological contract as worthwhile researching and demonstrate the need for study from the literature (for this, see the previous literature review sections) does not, in principle, tally with the Husserlian vision of research whereby the tendency of all background understanding must be disposed of (Lopez and Willis 2004). After all, in relation to this followers of descriptive phenomenology propose – in a nevertheless debatable manner – abstaining from a pre-study literature review (Lopez and Willis 2004; Wojnar and Swanson 2007). The aim of this withholding is to neutralise personal bias and prior knowledge on the part of the researcher – which in the context of this research/the interpretive phenomenological vision employed is deemed impossible (Deutscher 2001 in Wojnar and Swanson 2007). In addition and as is the case here, the manner of designing research derives from the researcher's knowledge base – since a suitable study design that can create useful knowledge is and has been sought from experience and literature (Lopez and Willis 2004). Interpretive phenomenology is furthermore useful in this study, as it does not exclude the reference to a study-oriented theoretical framework – in this situation the psychological contract, its nature and state – without wishing to suggest that a pre-defined psychological contract realisation was used as a point of departure for this research (Lopez and Willis 2004). The intention with this work is to interpret the essence of the psychological contract experienced/expressed by the IBT and hereby 'to fuse the horizons' of the researcher's (my) ideas, beliefs, experiences with those of the Belgian research participants (Cole and Avison 2007, p. 823). An understanding of the IBT psychological contract, its distinctiveness and state will and has eventually been co-generated, since on the one hand both the researcher (myself) and the interviewee arrived at the research with certain

used, also in view of the direct literal link with the interpretive epistemology of study – see above).

forestructures or pre-understandings, and on the other hand a circular process of wordy interaction, explanation and interpretation between actors took place (Wojnar and Swanson 2007). These spirals of ‘embodied’ knowledge-creation are – in an entirely personal way, but based on the work of Cole and Avison (2007) – illustrated in the figure below (*figure 2*) (Lowes and Prowse 2001, p. 474):

Figure 2: the knowledge-creation process of this phenomenological study (adapted from Cole and Avison (2007))



And so, to recapitulate, within the variety of research paradigms, the interpretive phenomenological position adopted is deemed the most suitable for helping to ‘answer’ the research question(s) of this study, which for Crotty (2010) means a justification of research position.

The phenomenological inquiry concerned is considered appropriate for capturing lived experience and practical perspectives of Belgian IBTs in order to uncover the essence(s) in/of their psychological contract interpretation/experience shared. In conjunction with the unique diversity characterising the IBT population, through its bilateral social construction and the subjective, individual particularity, the psychological contract construct

defined for this study also tallies optimally with the subjectivistic epistemology and ontology in which interpretive phenomenology originates (Rousseau 1989; Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998; Welch and Worm 2006, p. 285).

Furthermore, interpretive phenomenology is experienced as both inspiring and comfortable for myself as a researcher too. An additional, yet wholly personal, motivation for applying this research strategy involved after all the desire to differentiate myself, as a researcher, in an engaged manner and to provide myself the possibility to be able to learn/'grow' from out of a worldview different from my current everyday overall positivistic (engineer/hard HR) work context.

By way of conclusion, it can be stated that the research process designed is not only appropriate for answering the research question(s) of this study but also meets a personal interest associated with this DBA.

4.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Along with its theoretical perspective for conducting research, interpretive phenomenology can be understood as a 'methodology, a research strategy or plan' that lies behind the methods employed in a particular investigation (Tan, Wilson and Olver 2009, p. 2). This perspective encompasses a creative approach to understanding, using whichever procedure for responding to specific questions or situations (Laverty 2003). Van Manen (1990) emphasises that within an interpretive phenomenological context, efforts are made to avert any tendency towards strict/fixed procedures and techniques that might constrict a research project. As a result, the researcher is thus burdened with the task of developing or selecting the most suitable methods – following on from his/her world vision (cf. explained in the previous section) – in order to examine the experience under discussion. In this case the figurative reference whereby 'methodology' is proposed as a map and the 'methods' presented as the routes between the locations on the map is less

valid (Wahyuni 2012). Instead, the researcher can freely determine his/her pathways within an interpretive phenomenological context and/or enter unfamiliar terrain (van Manen 1990).

Without undermining the freedom of method, it can nevertheless be observed that a qualitative research strategy – and methods – usually go hand in hand with an interpretive research paradigm (Bryman and Bell 2011). A qualitative approach is in addition extremely suitable for ‘unpacking’ new, seldom researched phenomena, such as the Belgian IBT psychological contract here (Birkinshaw, Brannen and Tung 2011, p. 575). Qualitative methods imply intense contact with the life situation – as followed in this study – and an emphasis on a phenomenon embedded in its context without prescribing a standardised set of research instruments for this (Miles and Huberman 1994). Compared with the raft of techniques included under the qualitative research umbrella, it is indeed established that the researcher forms a/the essential study ‘measurement device’ (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 7). Particularly within an interpretive phenomenological research context, the researcher concerned is clearly visible, is not without prejudices and is also a co-generator of knowledge (van Manen 1990). In addition, within this research and referring to the work of LeVasseur (2003), the researcher (myself) acted with a certain ‘persistent curiosity’ whereby a symbiosis was created between the experiences of the research participants to be understood/interpreted as new, and the fore-structures present/embedded (Wojnar and Swanson 2007). This inquisitive, open and unobtrusive attitude towards the research participants was/is essential, otherwise there would be a real danger that positions are assumed based on scientific reference points while the essence of the participant’s experience would remain on the surface.

Despite the justified match of a qualitative research strategy within a phenomenological framework, the abovementioned freedom to choose methods is/was more fully exploited in this study. Since Heidegger (1988, p. 328) states that research progression is achieved if ‘a method is genuine and provides access to the object studied’, there is indirectly/in my own

interpretation agreement with the application of several distinct methods within an interpretive phenomenological study. Along with the qualitative method focus essentially employed here (and described below), a quantitative undercurrent can also be discerned in the research execution. A number of descriptive statistics have been used for supplementarily detailing and enhancing the qualitative (interpreted) descriptions and in this way to reinforce the delineated (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins 2009). These 'quasi-statistics' were developed – along with for instance the average age calculations when presenting the study participants – with the data analysis, and were principally expressed by various general quantity indications (such as 'many', 'strongly', 'dominant', etc.) (Barton and Lazarsfeld 1955 in Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins 2009, p. 125). This quantitatively supplementary information consequently lends itself to an enhanced clarity of the research participant's voice, and ultimately entails an enriched interpretation of data (Frels and Onwuegbuzie 2013). A quantitative flavour such as this within the qualitative study approach fits within the applicable subjectivistic research framework – as one of the various accounts that can represent a phenomenon – still it is and was not/never the intention to arrive at external statistical generalisations (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins 2009). The limited, yet valuable, contribution of quantitative data therefore does not infringe on the subjective – and dominant qualitatively elaborated – research paradigm upon which this study is founded (Frels and Onwuegbuzie 2013). After all, the superiority of qualitative research to gaining an in-depth insight into complex phenomena and its suitability within the ontological/epistemological study background cannot be denied/undermined (Conklin 2007; Creswell 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins 2009).

4.3. RESEARCH UNITS

The research sample for this study has been selected purposefully, as is mostly the case in qualitative studies (Miles and Huberman 1994). Purposive sampling involves a non-probability form of sampling whereby potential research participants are strategically selected so that their answers are

relevant depending on the research questions (Bryman and Bell 2011). More specifically, a criterion sampling strategy was applied, with all cases/interviewees meeting the criteria included in the definition of an IBT (Miles and Huberman 1994; Creswell 2007). As mentioned earlier in this work, (Belgian) IBTs are presumed to be '(a) (Belgian) professionals – employees –, (b) who travel internationally (to various locations) for business, work-related, purposes, (c) on a regular basis – at least 10 per cent of their working hours –, (d) without the accompanying presence of family, (e) with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks' (Shaffer et al 2012).

Research participants, the IBTs forming part of this study, have been gathered and recruited through people and information (contact addresses) available in the firm where I am employed (EASYPAY GROUP: a Belgian HR services and software provider) or made available through networking activities (with respect to confidentiality of information and contacts used/transferred as explained in what follows).¹⁴ It should hereby also be noted that besides the abovementioned criterion sampling strategy, a convenience sampling flavour has to some extent been employed for the non-random sampling technique used (Miles and Huberman 1994). The proximity of and the network of the researcher/my own work environment determined the composition of the research participant group, which might possibly influence the credibility of the study (Miles and Huberman 1994).

¹⁴ For clarification: participants are not employed at EASYPAY GROUP. Their contact addresses are only (directly/indirectly) retrieved through information available to EASYPAY GROUP or obtained during informal contact/business events where I myself (as a researcher and EASYPAY GROUP manager) participated. Using its software and services, EASYPAY GROUP sees to the wage processing of 15 per cent of the Belgian working population. Consequently, the company has at its disposal a considerable database of coordinates of HR and other managers or representatives at both customer and prospect organisations. In addition, the customer and prospect pool consists of organisations operating internationally.

Nevertheless, the research participants could by no means be called acquaintances or friends of myself (in the role of researcher), which must have been beneficial for the depth of the interview (Seidman 2006). Seidman (2006) after all illustrates that conducting interviews with acquaintances implies a limited depth of statements, since a feeling of understanding arises too soon between researcher and participant – which was thus avoided with this study.

With the composition of the sample, the intention was to obtain some diversity in the population to be researched by targeting (and consequently including) firms of different sizes and operating in dissimilar sectors (nevertheless two participants are employed in the same company). This way, the aim is/was to improve the likelihood of collecting rich and unique accounts of personal experiences (van Manen 1990). Although differentiation in the limited sample was not the principal objective nor was any absolute requirement of the research approach applied here, personal attention was paid to the study not taking the form of an all-male investigation.

To be precise, nine participants were recruited for this study, of which two women and seven men.¹⁵ The average age of the research participants was 35 (the youngest was 28, the oldest 43). Not all professionals had developed international experience themselves in previous employments (other jobs); yet most of them had, although varying in the number of years due, amongst other things, to the age difference of those involved. One participant was/is still in his first job (indicated below as ‘Sam’).

The following table (*table 7*) provides the job title and age (in years) for each participant as well as their current employer’s business activity and the total

¹⁵ Three persons interested in the study (of which two female and one male) could not be retained for ultimate data collection, given that their travel frequency was too limited (specifically, only once a quarter).

number of employees working at the firm, with a reference to the location of operation. The participants are listed in the order in which they were met, stating their assigned pseudonym.

Table 7: *profile of participants*

| PSEUDONYM | JOB TITLE | AGE | APPROXIMATE % OF TIME SPENT ABROAD¹⁶ | BUSINESS ACTIVITY OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT'S EMPLOYER | N° OF EMPLOYEES |
|------------------|------------------------------|------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| Nils | Sales Manager | 37 | 30-40 | Production of (laminate/wooden) flooring-solutions, panels and roofing elements | 4,000 (world-wide) |
| Cindy | Global Category Manager | 31 | 15 | Steel wire transformation and manufacturing of coatings | 27,000 (world-wide) |
| Bill | Senior Consultant | 40 | 15-20 | Business (IT) consulting | 750 (Belgium) |
| Kevin | Solution Integration Manager | 35 | 80 | Production of compressors, construction and mining equipment, power tools and assembly systems | 35,000 (world-wide) |
| Sam | Export Manager | 35 | 40 | Production of kitchen and bath linen | 200 (Belgium) |

¹⁶ The percentages included in the table (*table 7*) concern the indications that were established at the time of meeting the interview participants. Also in accordance with what all participants confirmed, estimates are varying and are, amongst other things, summarised in a non-restrictive manner, influenced by: employer business activities, projects involved in, client wishes/requirements and the relationship with them, market circumstances, etc.

| | | | | | |
|----------|---|----|-------|---|---|
| Florence | Import Director – Mgt. Committee member | 42 | 10-15 | Production of kitchen and bath linen | 200 (Belgium) |
| Marc | Export Sales Manager | 29 | 40 | Production of linen/fabrics for upholstery and curtains | 24 (Belgium) |
| Andy | Business Analyst – Corporate Mgt. Team member | 28 | 50 | Heavy lifting manufacturing and engineered transport | 3,000 (world-wide) |
| Walter | Technical Manager | 40 | 10 | Glass mould manufacturing | 3,500 (spread over 6 sites in the EU and 1 in the US) |

The sample size (including its composition) is open to – refutable – discussion. However, as Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 24) comment, qualitative research (as opposed to quantitative studies) is usually carried out with small samples of people, nested in a specific context. The practical interpretation of what is ‘small’ can nevertheless give rise to questions/uncertainties: too small a sample may lead to too limited an intake of perceptions, while one too large may lead to redundant repetition (Mason 2010). In order to determine a sufficient size of the sample, within qualitative research the researcher should preferably follow the principle and the moment of data saturation – in other words, the moment when gathering further data does not longer adds value (Mason 2010). Although data saturation is accepted as a gold standard for sample size indication, at present literature lacks practical guidelines for concept operationalisation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Consequently identifying the moment data-saturation is indistinct but delicate. In accordance with the study by Mason (2010) in which the number of research participants within qualitative PhD studies in the UK and Ireland (from 1716) is analysed,

phenomenologically constructed doctoral research appears to be based on a research sample of at least six participants. The data further demonstrates that slightly more than half of the studies fall within a range of five to twenty-five participants; a range that can also be found in the work of Creswell (2007) (Mason 2010). Creswell (2007, p. 126) refers specifically in his book to Dukes (1984) and Riemen (1986), the one author proposing an ideal sample size of between three and ten individuals, and the other having studied ten within a phenomenological context. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) in turn posit a sample consisting of three to six participants as reasonable for obtaining meaningful data through interpretive phenomenological analysis. The research sample consisting of nine participants on which this study is based falls within the abovementioned sample size extremities and can consequently be deemed a sufficient size. In addition, supplementary to the abovementioned, after having obtained data from eight participants there arose a personal sense of data saturation; in other words, I had the impression – possibly subjectively – that nothing fundamentally new had been uncovered in the final research participants' narrative. However, since such a moment is susceptible to discussion and personal doubt, after consultation with the promoter appointed for this study – Dr Atkinson – an extra, ninth research participant was enlisted. This participant was only recruited to the study in the latter instance in order to gauge the sense of data saturation in practice. Data collection with the extra participant therefore confirmed – at least for myself – the moment of data saturation. Objective motivation in this respect can nevertheless not be given: after all, every life and consequently every research participant's narrative is unique, thus in principle there should always be new things to discover (O'Reilly and Parker 2013). Nevertheless, the sense of data saturation was furthermore confirmed with an analysis of the research results – described in the analysis section that follows (5. DATA ANALYSIS).

4.4. DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

4.4.1. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

In this study, in-depth interviewing was applied as a data collection method.¹⁷ Interviewing is seen – also in a phenomenological context – as the most used and normal method for acquiring lived data experience (Gibson and Hanes 2003).

Semi-structured interviews (which are described below) were used to try to obtain descriptions of the life world of the IBTs selected in order to interpret the meaning of their psychological contract (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). People's experiences and the reflections in this regard were in fact gathered or borrowed allowing the researcher/me to become more experienced myself (van Manen 1990, p. 62). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 27) in this context talk more specifically of 'semi-structured life world interviews', van Manen (1990, p. 63) refers to it as 'conversational interviews'. Independent of their name, yet applied within an interpretive phenomenological study context, an interview method such as this very closely approaches a normal/everyday conversation whereby the interviewees become participants or collaborators of the research project (van Manen 1990; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). However, within a professional research project the conversations go further/deeper, since there is a certain goal associated with this as well as a structure to the conversation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The phenomenological interview is ultimately a data-generating activity that is determined/designed by the philosophical position assumed by the researcher – in this case an interpretive one (Lowes and Prowse 2001).

¹⁷ It should be noted that the use of the terms 'data collection' or 'gathering' in this research is distinct from any aim for objective, quantitative information, but essentially comprises a recollection of experiences (van Manen 1990).

Although within interpretive phenomenology there is no step-by-step formula for gathering data, a certain form of structure is required; more specifically, with interviews the interview plan must be devised in advance and be oriented towards the central research question in order for it not to lead both everywhere and nowhere (van Manen 1990). The interview guidelines used here were devised in advance and discussed with the supervisor of this research (Dr Carol Atkinson). Both the questions and interview structure were tested beforehand through on the one hand a consultancy assignment¹⁸ independent of this study – yet elaborated in an academic context – and on the other hand by having integrated certain interview sections into various DBA assignments (mini investigations). These pilot exercises should have increased the effectiveness of the questions and the entire interview structure (Bryman and Bell 2011).¹⁹ As stated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), such

¹⁸ The assignment referred to concerns a consultancy project conducted (in 2010) for DEME (an internationally operating dredging company), in collaboration with the Catholic University and Flanders Business School (under supervision of Professor Dr Luc Sels). The purpose of the joint research effort was to build state of the art competence on the retention of project managers on international projects. As an initial stage of the assignment design, a concise literature investigation was performed on drivers of the career path in international project management (in which the psychological contract was also discussed). Academically supported and constructed interviews were then conducted with HR and project managers in order to discuss conclusions as well as to formulate recommendations for practice with the DEME management. My role in the project concerned comprised – under supervision – conducting the literature study, arranging the interview structure, recording the interviews and forming the initial conclusion from the interview data. Although I was unable to pursue the study to its end/conclusion for reasons not stated here, my research interest in international human resources issues remained keen and the interview experience was extremely useful and appropriate for this study.

¹⁹ It should be stated that all interviews that were performed/conducted with the pilot exercises occurred in the mother tongue of the participants and myself, i.e. in Dutch.

tests also constitute a criterion for successful interviewing. The researcher's interview skills are inevitably a requirement for proper/possible data collection (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Without in any sense being able to refer to myself, as a researcher, as a professional interviewer, I do possess certain professional experience in conducting selection and recruitment interviews, in particular. I had been performing this task for around six months in my professional career, and nowadays still regularly conduct interviews. This professional experience, combined with the various interview exercises that were performed within the scope of this DBA process, should have implied that the skills required for accurately conducting interviews were attained.

It can be noted peripherally that by using the interview data collection method described here, there is a disassociation from the quantitative method-dominance that characterises the greater share of psychological contract research (Conway and Briner 2009). Conway and Briner (2009) report in this context that around 90 per cent of empirical psychological contract studies are based on quantitatively designed questionnaire surveys. Despite their frequent use, it would appear that pre-constructed self-report questionnaires are nonetheless not particularly suitable for assessing social exchange relationships – such as the psychological contract – unless applied in a relatively stable research setting or when specifically developed to capture the changes occurring within an organisation (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998; Reis and Wheeler 1991 in Conway and Briner 2009). In contrast, in-depth interviews produce rich data/information concerning the interviewees' idiosyncratic experiences and their psychological contract interpretation (Conway and Briner 2009). Such accounts are vital for understanding people and their interpretation, and are also more appropriate for/consistent with experimental research into an individualised subjective concept such as the psychological contract (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998).

The questionnaires and results were only translated afterwards, when writing out the research.

While arguing that interviews are a powerful technique for data collection in this study, interviews can have potential disadvantages too. They are in particular not suitable for distinguishing causal relationships, being able to propose generalisations or theory testing (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998; Conway and Briner 2009). Given that the aforementioned objectives for this work are not of primary interest (see 1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES), using the semi-structured interview data collection method is not interpreted as impeding, but well-suited.

4.4.2. THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The produced interview guide for the purpose of this study has been constructed around the phenomenon of the IBT psychological contract; with sufficient space and flexibility for the interviewees to share their lived experiences with regard to the studied topics (Miles and Huberman 1994).

As can be found in the interview guidelines (included in the appendix, 7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE), following an introduction and having acquired signatures to confirm informed consent (see below) each interview commenced with a number of general questions probing into the interviewee's career and work, as well as family and personal background. In this way, it was attempted to obtain information in a somewhat structured manner that could create a coherent insight for illuminating the first sub-research question, namely 'What is the role of the IBT?'

The interview was – in a semi-structured way – conducted with the following principal questions:

- Could you please describe me your relationship with your employer, beyond the employment contract as an assumed basis of your employment relationship?
- What do you believe your employer is obliged to provide to you within the context of your current International Business Travel assignment?

- Beyond what is written/agreed upon in your formal employment contract, what do you consider you are obliged to provide to your employer?
- Did your organisation make any promises to you when it employed you that it hasn't kept/has broken – if so, please describe this experience.
- As you think to the future, how could you describe your expected career plan?

However, the above questions were not always asked in the same order, since the order of questions was adjusted to the interviewee's narrative structure. As can also be seen in the interview guidelines attached (appendix 7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE), all of the questions were provided with follow-up sub-questions, since – referring to van Manen (1990, p. 67) – 'ready-made' questions are non-existent. After all, in order to be able to approach a phenomenon/experience in its full depth and also applicable in this inquiry, various side-questions must be proposed that investigate the understanding and significance of the stated phenomenon or experiences studied (van Manen 1990).

The flexibility characterising qualitative and interpretive phenomenological studies and thus the possibility of varying data collection techniques during the process represented an opportunity to adjust slightly the questionnaire initially set up along with both the/my learning process of conducting interviews and the expanded knowledge offered by the respondents (Miles and Huberman 1994; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). An example of an additional question is/was, amongst other things, the inquiry into the overall satisfaction with contract fulfilment connected with the impulse for quantification in this regard, specifically formulated as follows: 'How would you – overall – evaluate the state (the fulfilment) of your psychological contract with your current employer?' A flexibility such as this fits within this study's research paradigm, whereby research emerges as an exploration and knowledge is co-constructed through the dynamics of wordy interaction between human beings, interpretation and understanding (see also figure 2) (Wojnar and Swanson 2007; Crotty 2010).

At the end of each interview, the respondents were given the opportunity to provide any comments or information that had not yet been discussed and the inclusion of which they believed important. While none of the interviewees yielded anything new/specific, on the abovementioned question it turned out that the interviewees repeated – according to their interpretation and with a certain stoicism – the main point of their discourse, or related even more practical examples/experiences.

Some time after the interview (and explained into more detail in what follows, 4.5. DATA ANALYSIS-METHOD), the interviewees were sent a reconstructed summary, derived from the transcribed account, of their shared experiences. Following this data output division, one respondent of the nine provided an additional written reflection concerning what had been discussed. This reflection was however not added to the original interview transcript for further analysis given it rather involved a clarification of a statement that might be interpreted incorrectly.

4.4.3. THE RESEARCH LANGUAGE

Since van Manen (1990) refers to an interpretive phenomenological researcher having to be sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, in this study interviews were only conducted in the researcher's (my) and the participants' mother tongue, i.e. Dutch. It is important to use everyone's (the researcher and researchee's) own language, since this allows the interviewees to be able to express themselves fully and comfortably, and authenticity in the answers is preserved in this manner (Welch and Piekkari 2006).

Baumgartner (2012) specifically illustrates in her qualitative study – nevertheless in the working field of Information Systems – that a substantial portion of information (emotional depth) gets lost if interviews are conducted in a language that is not the interviewee's mother tongue. A reduced desire to talk, disinterest in the subject and restricted expression of feelings are

cited as disadvantages related to the choice of an interviewee's non-native tongue as inquiry language (Baumgartner 2012).

From the interviewer's – my – position, conducting the interviews in Dutch implied and facilitated the data interpretation characterised by a sense of 'cultural understanding' (Welch and Piekkari 2006, p. 422). Using a language other than my/the interviewee's native tongue for interviewing would, as stated by Baumgartner (2012), possibly have led to a different, artificial interview atmosphere. The risk associated with this is that the interviewee would have undesirably restrained him/herself from normal language use and rhythm, in order to enhance my understanding. Since reservedness such as this conflicts somewhat with the search for essential experiences within a phenomenological research context, the decision to use our native tongue as inquiry language is justified (van Manen 1990; Baumgartner 2012).

As is dealt with later in further detail (see 4.5. DATA ANALYSIS-METHOD), the switch back from Dutch to English was postponed as far as possible and only occurred following the data analysis. Measures in order to retain quality and authenticity between the findings and the translations were taken in this regard (and are described in the chapter 4.6. QUALITY CRITERIA).

4.4.4. THE RESEARCH TECHNIQUE

Although interpretive phenomenological research supposes a somewhat 'intimate' relationship between the researcher and the researchee, distance must nevertheless be (and has been) maintained in order not to allow the interview to veer off into a normal conversation (Lowes and Prowse 2001, p. 474; Seidman 2006).

It was attempted to keep my researcher's relationship with the study participants balanced, amongst other things by keeping in mind the contributing factors formulated for this purpose by Seidman (2006) as clarified hereafter.

Seidman (2006) considers it important not to share any experiences with interviewees (and neither did this happen); great care was also taken to ensure the interview progressed in a respectful and friendly/formal manner. There was always a greeting and mutual introduction of all parties involved in the interview before the actual interview commenced.

In connection with this Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasise that the co-generated knowledge between the researcher and the research participant results from a professional conversation in which some power asymmetry must nevertheless exist. Put extremely strictly and theoretically, it is ultimately always the intention that the interviewer 'asks' – in a conversation started and ended by him/herself – and the interviewee 'answers' so that the researcher (scientist) is able to obtain study-related data or have this co-generated (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). However, within the interpretive phenomenological vision in which this study is situated, it was by no means the intention to allow this theoretical power asymmetry to take the lead in the interview. The main focus consisted of empowering the interviewed empathically to share experiences and to reconstruct them in relation to their IBT role and their psychological contract.

The research technique used was furthermore characterised by an active and concentrated listening process. What participants were reporting was intensely listened to, in order to understand their experiences and to build on these further. There was also an attempt to sound out the interviewees' 'inner voice', which for instance was specifically translated into questions on clarity regarding the words 'involvement', 'nice', etc. used (Seidman 2006, pp. 78-79). Two examples of what was discussed during the interviews (with Bill and Nils), to be interpreted as non-exhaustive, are presented below:

E.g. – Bill

Interviewer: *'Could you specify what you mean with the word nice?'*

Bill: *'Job satisfaction, for me that's just the definition of nice, if you're busy doing something and you look at your watch (...) the hours have flown by, that sort of thing. That is the definition of nice. And nice can also be the relationship with people who you work with. The fact you work well with*

them and also have a laugh with them, then it's a pleasure, that you also laugh. And at the end of the trip if the client is happy, is satisfied, that's my definition of nice.'

E.g. - Nils: 'What I find nice in my job (...) the nice aspect of my job is still going to clients.'

Lastly, the entire listening process was at all times monitored with regard to time and content: care was always taken – by myself/in my thoughts – that the topics I wanted to deal with were broached in an interview timespan of under two hours. The length of the interviews varied from 53 to 90 minutes (average: 68 minutes). The openness of personality and corresponding ease in broadly sharing information of the interviewee logically proved crucial according to interview length.

As recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), after each interview a brief period of reflection was incorporated whereby I (as researcher, interviewer) together with the transcriber appointed for this study commented on how the interview went and what was said. The person who saw to the transcription followed all of the interviews (without making any contribution or assuming any research role during the interview), in order to enhance the authenticity of the transcription. Feelings and impressions were exchanged and discussed without the intention of forming a conclusion. 'Debriefing' such as this felt, for me personally, enriching and meaningful. The impact of this on the research or data analysis process can nevertheless not strictly be distinguished. However, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) report the value-adding nature of such a reflection on the transcript analysis.

In addition, throughout the entire research process I kept a reflective journal.²⁰ During this DBA process I regularly foresaw time to fill in my 'think

²⁰ My learning log entries were either entirely new or built further on previous experiences written down in the journal or in my work notebook. My learning log

book' – also because it was required for a specific assignment associated with a module of this DBA (Moon 2006, p. 2). The frequency of journal entries increased during the period of actual interviews, and I was returning to my journal after nearly every interview. The initially imposed character of keeping a journal evolved into a natural time for reflection whereby feelings and experiences could be 'dumped' (Cooper 1991 in Moon 2006, p. 82). Van Manen (1990, p. 73) in this context emphasises that within a phenomenological study context, researchers find journal writing 'very helpful', specifically for 'keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, for reflecting on previous reflections, for making the activities of research themselves topics for study and so forth.' I could/can indeed concur with the above. Writing down my thoughts allowed me to step into my 'inner mind' – just like I was attempting to listen to the research participants' inner voices – which broadened the interpretation of what the research participants had shared with me earlier; at least that is what I felt (Janesick 1999, p. 514; Seidman 2006, pp. 78-79). Reflecting in particular on conducting interviews also created a kind of self-awareness concerning myself as a researcher, which also contributed towards the credibility of this study elaboration (Lowes and Prowse 2001).

4.5. DATA ANALYSIS-METHOD

Qualitative data analysis is an extremely intuitive and flexible process (Creswell 2007). A good data analysis is cyclical, runs in different phases and already starts with the data collection (Miles and Huberman 1994; Creswell 2007). Interpretive phenomenology in particular does not propose any formula or procedure for data analysis (in accordance with its methodological

developed in a very personal (electronic) format. I made all entries in my mother tongue (Dutch), partly because writing in my own language feels (in my opinion at least) more personal and comfortable.

freedom as abovementioned) (Ehrich 2005). However performing/actually doing interpretive data analysis work is itself, as seen by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 80), 'challenging' and an 'inevitably complex process'. In this regard and without to any extent questioning the intuitive nature of phenomenological analysis, various authors such as van Manen (1990), Finlay (1999), Caelli (2001), Cope (2005) and Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) do present a number of guidelines and points of attention for analysis. For this work – from a pragmatic point of view yet respecting the study's underpinning research philosophy – the data analysis was therefore conducted untied to any school/freely, according to a practical set of 'phenomenologically inspired' rules. The analysis process applied – in particular partly derived from the work of van Manen (1990) and Cope (2005) and the advice received during the Mini-Viva of this DBA – consists of a number of, five, principal stages (that yet were not always performed in sequential order). The guiding principles taken on throughout the analysis activities can be summarised as follows:

- **STEP 1:** data management

Once the interviews were recorded, the tapes were sent off for transcription. The transcription was assigned to a research agency specialising in this (respecting data confidentiality with the transcription).²¹ The interviews, transcripts and MS Word files were stored in a webspace/database accessible online, specifically set up (and secured) for this study. My own notes taken during the interview were also appended with/throughout the transcript as additional comments. These comments were nonetheless/largely limited to accounts of the participants' behavioural expression – I was unable to take further notes since I was 'in' the interview to such a degree. In principle they do represent a

²¹ This transcriber confirmed in writing that all of the data obtained and provided were treated confidentially in accordance with the ESOMAR codes for conducting market research.

supplementary data source. However, these notes were not additionally included for in-depth analysis, given the limited (in-depth) content.

- **STEP 2:** personal data sense-making process

The interview transcripts were read various times to gain a degree of familiarity with the data and to 'get to know' the participants (Cope 2005, p. 178; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Caelli (2001) considers this sense-making act as the effective start of the interpretation process with data analysis. The 'uncompromising interpretive enterprise' commenced with this step forms a principal feature of the phenomenological approach adopted for this study (interpretive phenomenology) (Holstein and Gubrium 1994 in Cope 2005, p. 168).

Baumgartner (2012) emphasises in this context furthermore the importance of performing data familiarisation in the language of the research, thus in this case Dutch. If the basis data for analysis were translated into a language different from the one actually used in the research, the aim of this 'familiarisation step' to explore the general research atmosphere would be somewhat undermined (Baumgartner 2012, p. 12).

- **STEP 3:** telling and selling the participant's story

A 'story' must in this study be viewed or interpreted as a narrative that contains a number of events (derived from the participants' accounts of their experiences) that make sense/determine understanding (Caelli 2001, p. 278). The stories were specifically constructed by removing the passages from the transcript that, on reading, were deemed to be irrelevant, as well as extracting the questions – an analysis technique proscribed by Caelli (2001). That which remained was reworked – the participants' words were interpreted and presented in summary as a logical and/or chronological whole. The 'reconstructed' stories were also

provided with an introduction including some background information on the interviewee (van Manen 1990, p. 170).²² The interpreted summaries were subsequently presented to the respective participants for completion/confirmation and in order to obtain certainty that their stories had been understood correctly (Cope 2005). In accordance with that which is reported below (4.6. QUALITY CRITERIA), the feedback and confirmation asked for contribute to striving for a qualitative study. This communication process was also performed in Dutch (for reasons stated above).

▪ **STEP 4:** thematic analysis

One of the most general and widely applied ways of analysing qualitative data involves thematic analysis; nevertheless, the way that themes are determined and defined varies (Bryman and Bell 2011). Within an interpretive phenomenological framework, themes represent ‘the structures of experience’ or – put figuratively – knots in a web of experiences around which a complete lived experience is spun (van Manen 1990, p. 79; 90).

In order to identify the themes, this study follows/followed two of the three approaches proposed by van Manen (1990, pp. 92-93), namely: the selective or highlighting approach and the wholistic or sententious approach. With the selective/highlighting principle, statements/sentences that appear(ed) elucidating or essential in relation to the phenomenon studies are(were) indicated as a basis for theme isolation; while the wholistic/sententious reading approach consists of questioning which

²² Integrating the analysis step concerned refers directly to the ‘personal life story’ approach that van Manen (1990) frequently mentions in his work. It should nevertheless be noted that this study does not really involve/include reconstructed ‘life stories’ – since the study subject ‘psychological contract’ focuses primarily on the participants’ professional life. Nonetheless, the interviews held were converted and adapted into a concise, summarised story for the analysis and quality objectives stated in the main text.

sententious phrase captures the fundamental meaning of a text (van Manen 1990, pp. 92-93). The theme determination was mainly designed through the highlighting approach, in this case by underlining in the transcription. The wholistic approach was on the one hand employed in a later research phase in order to obtain supplementations/finesses to the themes, or indicate additional research paths to be specified (as considered under 6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH). On the other hand, the final interview conducted was also analysed in accordance with the latter point of view, although adjusted to the outcome of the selective process first performed.

The highlighting approach generated both explicit and implicit themes (hidden meanings) that became apparent through 'dialogue with the text' communicated (van Manen 1990, p. 21). The concepts – subjectively interpreted 'abridgements of meanings expressed by the interviewees' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 205) – arising from the text/a first case analysed were subsequently clustered into sub- and main themes. This same exercise/detective work (performed by pasting the transcribed text into Excel) was conducted for three cases, connected throughout and later completed in all cases – with the exception of the final case, as cited above (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009).²³ Free imaginative variation was applied in this cluster/connection exercise in order to verify whether a theme was indeed an essential part of the phenomenon being studied: the IBT and his/her psychological contract (van Manen 1990). The constantly recurring question I therefore asked myself as an analyst was 'Is this phenomenon – more precisely the main concept of each research question (the role of the IBT, the psychological contract content/nature and

²³ This manner of data elaboration, in other words analysing one interview, then focusing the analysis on three interviews in order then to view the whole, arose from the advice provided by Dr Nancy Harding at my Mini-Viva (held on 29 November 2012).

the state of it) – still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?’ (van Manen 1990, p. 107). This inquiry was not a one-off, but was performed several times during the analysis period. The sub-themes and themes initially defined thus underwent some change until a good/comfortable feeling in this regard was achieved. For information purposes, two examples of sub-theme and theme evolution are presented in the table below (*table 8*).

Table 8: example of concept, sub-themes and themes evolution

| CONCEPT | SUB-THEME | THEME |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Being involved with decisions | Involvement | Involved/associated |
| | Employer involvement | Open relationship |
| | Participation | Open relation |
| Dealing with travel budgets properly | Employee ethical behaviour | Honesty |
| | Employee ethical behaviour | Ethical behaviour |
| | In-role behaviour | Role behaviour |

Returning to that which was stated previously in this work concerning data saturation, it can be noted that no more new concepts – and consequently no new sub-themes and themes – were found after the sixth interview. After determining the themes of the first three interviews, all additional concepts and those experienced as ‘new’ could be linked with a theme already identified; only the concepts list evolved into richness (up to the sixth interview).

- **STEP 5:** writing up and rewriting so as to represent the data/themes

This final step involves/involves writing out and representing the themes in a narrative account, with the interviewees’ illustrative quotes being an essential part of this. Working with quotes follows logically from the ontological recognition of several realities (and multiple perspectives on the themes found) assumed in this study (Creswell 2007).

So as to avoid being 'buried' in writing and thus failing to equip the text with a revealing strength, it is and was important regularly to 'step back' and view the greater whole, as well as to examine the relevance of the various parts in the total textual structure (van Manen 1990, pp. 33-34). By striving for this organic, original, wholeness and so as to be able to convey the uniqueness of the participants' experiences (as individual parts of the study), alternative ways of data description were employed and combined (van Manen 1990; Cope 2005). Besides a presentation of the thematic analysis with themes resulting from this and the aim of providing the presentation in question with incision, just as great attention is/was paid to integrating the third analysis step in which a condensed reconstruction of the participants' story was performed/shared in the analysis section of this thesis (van Manen 1990; Cope 2005). Facilitating insight such as this to the audience/the reader is important, since I as a phenomenological researcher wish/wished to 'bring to speech' what the experiences are of IBTs in relation to their psychological contract (and their role) (van Manen 1990, p. 32).

In an attempt to address the reader in a unique, personal and rich way (van Manen 1990), the analysis texts were also integrated into the study over several months and from various settings, written and rewritten in the same way that a sculptor constantly shapes his sculpture. The distinction between the effective analysis and writing-up phase could consequently not strictly be made in this phenomenological study framework in the sense that the analysis is/was continued during the writing (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). The continued self-reflection process related to this has, for me as a researcher, been an in-depth personal and enriching learning process (exactly as Gibon and Hanes (2003) and van Manen (2007) advance). In my opinion, keeping a journal during the actual elaboration of this study most likely also contributed to my becoming aware of this learning process.

It should be noted that in this study execution, it was opted to have the translation into English performed as late as possible. Within the actual

research phase, the translation only concentrated on the final text of the data analysis – disregarding the translation/review of the various corrections following the ‘final text’ translation as a result of work-adjustments. After all, a previous, more extensive translation within the data analysis process would have resulted in an invisibility of certain concepts, less light being shed on certain participants’ experiences, and double analysis from on the one hand an insider/native position and on the other hand as an outsider (Temple and Young 2004; Welch and Piekkari 2006). With the translation, care was at all times taken to retain the authenticity of the original data as much as possible; nevertheless acknowledging that every language has a kind of unity that is difficult or cannot always be expressed in another language (Xian 2008). The measures taken to guarantee the data authenticity of the translation and subsequent quality of this study are discussed below (see 4.6. QUALITY CRITERIA).

4.6. QUALITY CRITERIA

Assessing the quality of a study performed qualitatively is challenging, yet important (Creswell and Miller 2000; Ali and Yusof 2011; Bryman and Bell 2011). The quality-evaluation concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability are after all usually synonymous with a positivistic approach that is not consistent with a qualitative research approach/the interpretive one used here (Creswell 2007).

Despite the confusion and lack of consensus in the literature on how to create a quality assessment of a qualitative study, it is/was nevertheless attempted to demonstrate that the qualitative inquiry undertaken is sound. For this purpose, recourse was made to the work of Creswell (2007) – literature that was utilised and recommended within this DBA process as supporting reading/course material. The work of Creswell and Miller (2010) and Ali and Yusof (2011) also provided some guidance in the search for quality performed.

In what follows, the criteria of validity and reliability are spelled out subsequently; it should hereby be immediately remarked that the quality criterion of generalisability is not deemed as suitable for further discussion. As an example for justification of this viewpoint there can, amongst others, be referred to van Manen (1990, p. 7) who considers phenomenology as the philosophy of 'the theory of the unique'. The focus on the researchee's individual unique accounts results from and is also consistent with the accepted subjectivistic paradigm that includes several/specific context-determined realities (as explained earlier in this chapter). Concentrating on generalisation of research findings from the study sample to an entire population (of IBTs) as a quality criterion of study execution would consequently conflict with the accepted interpretive phenomenological ideology (Bryman and Bell 2011).

4.6.1. VALIDITY

In related literature, not only are various typologies found for evaluating the validity of a qualitative study, readers/researchers are also overwhelmed by the many terms associated with the concept, such as authenticity, goodness, adequacy, plausibility, trustworthiness, credibility, etc. (Creswell and Miller 2000, p. 124; Ali and Yusof 2011, p. 27).

Creswell and Miller (2000) have in their work identified eight validation strategies for qualitative studies – whereby Creswell (2007) advises always considering at least two of them when evaluating quality. This research is consequently based – in a manner elaborated by myself – on the abovementioned vision and has been 'audited' for validity by: peer review sessions, member checking and presenting rich, thick descriptions (Creswell and Miller 2000; Creswell 2007).

The academic context in which this work features dictates that **peer review sessions** are part of the DBA journey.²⁴ The study – or at least its status at the time of explanation – was therefore presented to DBA colleagues (the DBA program director and a visiting professor) at these sessions, as of June 2013, September 2013 and February 2014. The aim of the presentations consisted in challenging myself as a researcher as well as the study-execution positions adopted; the big study picture, the practical execution of it and the problems encountered were critically and overtly discussed. My DBA-colleagues/peer debriefers provided me with constructive feedback and served as a sounding board for my study-ideas (like Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 129) indicated). The debriefings attended did not only add to the quality of this study, they also – put personally – gave me the energy necessary to continue working on this research project and its optimisation (alongside work).

In addition, the study validity was measured from what is known as a ‘second lens’: the research participants (Creswell and Miller 2000, p. 125). The procedure concerned seeks to actively involve the study participants in assessing the accurateness of interpretations made (Creswell and Miller 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985 in Creswell 2007, p. 208) consider **member checking** such as this ‘the most critical technique for establishing credibility’. Specifically for this research – as explicated above in the section on the data analysis-method (4.5. DATA ANALYSIS-METHOD) – an interpreted summary of the interview transcript was formally presented to the participants. Participants were in this manner able to provide their comments to the interpretation of that which was discussed during the interview and approve with or redefine the ‘story’ (reconstructed interview summary) sent. None of

²⁴ The peer review sessions in question should be viewed as separate from and supplementary to the contacts with my supervisor and the informal consultations with practitioners in regard to this study (as mentioned in 1.4.3. THE DIFFICULT-TO-SURMOUNT RESEARCH PRACTICE GAP).

the participants formulated further subject-related statements of experience or requested for narrative-adjustments; one respondent gave an additional written clarification concerning what had been talked over (in order to, as explicitly indicated, avoid misinterpretations concerning this detail). It can therefore be stated that the information/interpretations shared in this study are accurate representations of the participants' reality.

Lastly, this work has been enhanced in terms of quality by enriching the analysis of data with **thick descriptions** coming from the interviewees themselves. Including detailed accounts produces with readers a feeling of (effective/potential) recognition which should lead to improved trustworthiness and authenticity of study (Creswell and Miller 2000). Following on from the fact that the actual research in this study (the interviews) and the data analysis occurred in a language (Dutch) different from the language used for the present work (English), ensuring the authenticity of the accounts of the interviewees was critical. Although in her work Xian (2008) states that a translator in cross-cultural research should be considered a data interpreter, in this study it was attempted not to allow the translator to assume any role as a knowledge co-producer. The translator assigned for this study did indeed prove to be an effective colleague for this study, so as to be able to work efficiently (Welch and Piekkari 2006). However, interpreting research results might possibly have put data authenticity at risk since, for instance, the translator was not present at the data collection events (interviews), and the language of the interviews is not his native language. In an attempt to exclude any differences in nuance of what was said, written and translated, the translated texts were meticulously checked by myself as well as read through/discussed face to face with a second person, a trained English translator whose native language is Dutch. The 'bi-directionally' tinted translation approach applied brought inconsistencies in the translation to light (Baumgartner 2012, p. 16). These inconsistencies were eliminated by informing the native English translator of the context or background of the desired concept to be conveyed, so that the person involved could present the most appropriate English language usage for this purpose as a translation. In contrast with mono-language research,

this process has been hugely time consuming, although a requirement in order to guarantee the authenticity of data without wishing to state that a complete correspondence between the Dutch data and the English text was achieved. The process was nonetheless made easier by having worked through practically the entire DBA process with the same person.

4.6.2. RELIABILITY

Based amongst other things on the work of Ali and Yusof (2011), reliability or rather the degree to which a study would lead to the same results if conducted by a different researcher appears to be a contentious issue within a qualitative research discourse. Certain researchers, such as Stenbacka (2001), believe the criterion has no value given that reliability issues essentially relate to measurement methods and the repetitiveness of these in no way sense qualitative research features or aims. Consequently, from a qualitative perspective, reliability procedures should be addressed in a different, yet flexible, way (Creswell 2007; Ali and Yusof 2011). Reliability could be viewed as the degree to which the entire research process is explained in a reliable manner, thus enabling a possible repeat of the study (Stenbacka 2001; Morgan and Drury 2003; Ali and Yusof 2011). Input or information provision for a possible repetition such as this should nevertheless not be understood in the positivistic sense of the word, given the leading key role of the researcher in qualitative studies, characterised by specific competences and creativity, an exact replication is not applicable (Miles and Huberman 1994; Morgan and Drury 2003; Creswell 2007). With the attention in this study (this chapter in particular) devoted to the entire study design, more specifically the data collection, the researcher's role and the analysis explained step by step, it is assumed that the necessary study reliability has been accomplished (Morgan and Drury 2003).

4.7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to that which was proposed by Remenyi et al (2010), there are numerous issues – not resolved in literature and to be interpreted in a highly individual manner – that can/should be considered in order to ensure the integrity of research.

For this study and from a rather official point of view, ‘ethical approval’ was received on 25 February 2013 (in the manner expected by the University of Bradford and as part of a ‘transfer event’) for the entire execution of the research project.

As a personal comment, it can furthermore be stated that the study-work in question has been performed both with awareness of responsibility and respect for (potential) research participants (Bryman and Bell 2011). My intention was to allow this research to evolve into a ‘mutually beneficial exchange’ between the research participants and myself (as a researcher), in such a manner that everyone actively helped in building up this project (Bryman and Bell 2011). This means that a high priority was given to communication and in particular ‘informed consent’. Informed consent was not viewed as a one-off or purely administrative event, but as a process continuing throughout the interview. The interviewee was able to ask questions relating to the research, share his/her ideas, was free not to answer questions or to stop the interview – as also stated on the informed consent sheet and the interview guide (see appendix 7.3. INFORMED CONSENT and 7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE). Prior to the time of the interview, study-participants were given (via e-mail) the letter of consent that outlined the purpose of the study and ethical considerations such as anonymity. The document in question was enclosed with a follow-up email, consecutive to the recruitment-contact that shared some general study information and

confirmed the interview (see attached, appendix 7.2. INFORMATION SHEET).²⁵ The respondents were notified that if they formally agreed to participate in the study, the interview would be recorded for data collection purposes. As addressed/mentioned in the consent form, participants could withdraw their participation, or their data, from the study at any time up to the point of publication. Once the participant signed the letter of consent, the semi-structured interviewing were started.²⁶

As a researcher, I conducted the interviews with the utmost good will and intentions: there was (in my opinion) no undue focus on what the participant deemed to be bad experiences, so that the interviewee felt/continued to feel in balance. Any possible reactions or feelings of discomfort were treated with respect and empathic capacity. My relevant experience in this context – gained through conducting various interviews in both an academic and professional context as touched upon earlier – did contribute to the abovementioned attitude to safeguard participants from any harm being applied and observed. The fact that not a single interviewee withdrew from the study or refused to answer questions can confirm/reinforce the aforementioned intention.

²⁵ The follow-up recruitment email that confirmed the appointment with the future research participants and the consent form – both documents for which on 25 February 2013 ethical approval was received from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Panel at the University of Bradford – were sent (in an announced manner) to the interviewees in English. None of the participants mentioned not being able to understand this. Since previous communication (written/spoken) had been in the participants' native language and the consent form could be read through prior to the interview, it is assumed that these documents were entirely understood.

²⁶ A form was available and printed out to be signed at the time/date of the interview (for participants who did not have the letter signed with them).

Furthermore, compliance with data protection legislation and company/sector specific legal requirements or service level agreements was ensured. Since EASYPAY GROUP (the company through which respondents were found, see explanation above 4.3. RESEARCH UNITS), has received a service-provider label 'accredited' by the Belgian government and in addition has concluded a confidentiality agreement with its customers (as part of the cooperation contract), information and contract addresses must also/always – aside from this assignment – be handled confidentially. Information on non-customer organisations was/is treated with the same confidentiality and protection.

The records of who participated in the study are kept confidential. Both the electronic and physical storage (through a data carrier) occurred at a location locked with a code, accessible to the researcher. The server and cabinet space in question for this purpose are at my workplace EASYPAY GROUP, since the facilities for confidential and secure storage are familiar and available there. The tapes and transcripts were and will not be made available to others (non-related study researchers) without the consent of the participants. The information provided during the interviews has been analysed confidentially and pseudonyms are used in the report of findings (see below). Any information that would make it possible to identify participants is/will not be included in any published report relating to this study.

4.8. CONCLUSION

It was opted to conduct this study in accordance with a subjectivistic paradigm. Despite the fact that Heidegger (2000 in van Manen 2007, p. 13) warns that phenomenology 'never makes things easier, but only more difficult', interpretive phenomenology forms/formed the basis of this research.

This chapter explored the suitable nature of applying interpretive phenomenology to the research topic of study (the, Belgian, IBT psychological contract). Justification – based on literature – was also

provided of the qualitative study elaboration employed, albeit drawn up liberally and integrating a number of non-prevalent, quantitative elements.

This chapter furthermore presented the research participants (or at least how they became participants in an ethically responsible manner) and the techniques of effective research. The five-step process for data analysis – based on the work of both van Manen (1990) and Cope (2005), yet specifically adjusted to this study context – was also discussed. The measures/initiatives taken in this research process for retaining data quality were described, so as to be able to present the findings – contained in the following chapter – with the utmost conviction and in an accurate manner.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the research, arrived at by phenomenologically analysing the data gathered from nine interviews. Based on the data analysis performed, 'answers' are herewith offered to the three sub-research questions proposed at the start of this work and once again listed here:

- What is the role of the IBT?
- What is distinctive for the IBT's psychological contract, in terms of content and nature?
- What is the state of the IBT's psychological contract?

After having provided an analysis-introducing individual background concerning the research participants (as a first section of this chapter), the results of the thematic, inductive²⁷ analysis are further explained.

The aim with this two-fold analysis is to share my interpretation regarding the essence of the psychological contract experienced/expressed by the IBTs in a meaningful and as interesting way as possible. In addition, by setting this essence/these essences against related findings encountered in literature, it is attempted to reinforce the understanding and to illustrate the unique character of this study's results.

Put personally, performing the search for essential IBT psychological contract meaning was not straightforward. The analysis text below has been a project characterised by confusion and continual interpretation/reinterpretation. The cyclical processes of explanation, interpretation and understanding (as

²⁷ In this study the term 'inductive' refers to 'approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes of a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher' (Thomas 2006, p. 238).

depicted in figure 2) manifested themselves as whirlwinds throughout the data collection and analysis process. A number of quotes, taken at random from my journal, illustrate the analysis stumbling-blocks experienced and overcome:

'Rereading the transcripts makes my head spin – so much information... I end up getting confused. I'm really trying to create a creative analysis; yet it isn't easy...' [02/06/2013]

'... I immediately noticed/notice the difficulty of the hard graft associated with analyses such as this... I don't find the process boring, but rather complex. I heard a song on the radio this afternoon with the words 'my head is like a jungle'... well, today this statement is no lie for me, but completely applicable ...' [09/06/2013]

'Didn't really sleep last night – analysis work and theme determination is crazy... it's taking my thoughts up to an unmaintainable cruising speed that can no longer be stopped. Continually reviewing and questioning interpretations is altering the entire concept structure... however, when I look back at the original version, hardly any difference can be discerned.' [09/07/2013]

Despite the afore-noted 'mini issues', it should be emphasised that writing and rewriting the present results section was performed with a passion for the IBT psychological contract subject and with focused engagement in being able to provide a scientific and practical contribution with this research (as will be dealt with conclusively in this work, see 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION).

5.1. ANALYSIS INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This introductory section provides some individual background concerning the IBT research participants in relation to their family situation and their

current job/position, in order to become familiar with the participants/research 'collaborators' (van Manen 1990, p. 63). This offers an initial exploratory insight into the first sub-research question relating to the IBT role. In addition, a reflection – validated by the participants – is shared in regard to their psychological-contract evaluation and the future vision of their current employer partnership. The concise consideration concerned gives for each individual an indication of the IBT psychological contract distinctiveness and its state – representing a link with the second and third sub-research question respectively.

As touched upon earlier in this work (3.1.3. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT CONCEPT APPLIED IN THIS STUDY), brief mention is also made of how the IBTs interviewed view the other contract party (their current employer) without however giving this further analytical concentration.

The individual sections presented below are set out in the order in which the interviews were conducted. It was consciously decided with that which follows only to provide an extract of the 'reconstructed stories' that were validated by the interviewees (van Manen 1990, p. 170). The word limit imposed for this work forms the basis, amongst other things, of the abridged story record. In addition an attempt was made to avoid a non-relevant repetition or redundancy of information as far as possible with that what is exemplified in the thematic analysis (see 5.2. THEMATIC ANALYSIS).

5.1.1. THE STORY OF NILS

Nils (♂) is 37 years old and has three children (one of ten and eight-year-old twins). His wife works fulltime as a software consultant (and has brief experience as an expatriate). Nils is trained as a teacher in English, History and German. He currently works as a Sales Manager Industry Boards at a major international manufacturer of laminate floors, composite parquet, boards and panels. Nils himself has a number of clients under his responsibility, but still also manages four people, whereby he offers support

in strategy, prospection and price setting. The entire sales team worldwide consists of six people.

Nils has by now been working for this company almost five years, always in an international sales position. International business travel has been present since recruitment. With the exception of his first year and a half of work experience, travelling has consistently been part of his professional life – although in varying degrees and with specific implementation according to his previous two internationally active employers. Today, on average, travelling comes down to around one week a month abroad, with the Benelux countries and Germany being his most important markets. Trips to the Benelux countries are completed in one day, while for other countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Scandinavia, Turkey), the travelling involves three to four days. For Nils, international travel is a determinant aspect of his job. Not merely the travelling, the journeys, but also the contact with other cultures, foreign languages, and the diversity in client contacts are of great importance to Nils. Business travel for him means a necessary moment of peace, a moment to be able to catch his breath and to charge his batteries (both private and professional). At present, Nils couldn't do without it.

Nils is not so much concerned about status – for him it is his credibility that counts. He mainly derives his job satisfaction from the partnership that is built up with clients. Nils' job is important to him; however, the new organisation structure and the transfer/mixing of people from other departments mean that he is experiencing a drop in job importance (which expresses itself in practical matters).

The relationship with Nils' current employer is characterised by a close partnership whereby the social relationship (as well as the familial atmosphere) takes precedence over the economic, business deal. Nils considers his direct superior as his employer (rather than the organisation); it is also his direct superior who employed him and is responsible for his performance review. According to Nils, the mutual implicit obligations are properly fulfilled, and (non-expressed) promises were not at present being

broken. Nils is satisfied with his job and sees possibilities for further growth internally. For Nils, being able to progress internally to another role and gaining new experiences is highly essential within his employment deal. There is an expressed prospect of a long-term relationship, ideally with a focus on new markets and/or another product. A hypothetical proposed, future company switch is not currently on the/his agenda.

5.1.2. THE STORY OF CINDY

Cindy (♀) is 31 years old, married and has two daughters (one of two, one of eight months). Her husband works as a logistics engineer at a lorry manufacturer. Cindy is trained as a civil engineer, mechanical engineering. During her studies, she studied for half a year in Turkey. Cindy is currently globally responsible for purchasing dies, spools and packaging materials for a Belgian multinational specialised in steel wire and coatings. Cindy's responsibilities are summarised into four areas: the entire strategy concerning supplier management, negotiating with global suppliers, managing local teams that work directly with local suppliers, and monitoring market developments. She performs this role both on a project basis and on a broader operational level whereby she collaborates with internal as well as external teams (and also coordinates these, if necessary).

At the time of the interview, Cindy has been working for this company for around five and a half years, and international business travel has been present since recruitment. Before this IBT job, she worked as an – internationally commuting – supply chain consultant (for an organisation providing management consulting, technology and outsourcing services). On average, Cindy performs one business trip a month. The length of these trips depends on the destination: trips to America and China take up an entire week; within Europe (e.g. Slovakia, Switzerland) this varies from one to four days. When Cindy travels she usually does so alone, but at the destination, in the hotel, she comes into contact with colleagues who also work internationally. Cindy does not find travelling per se, and having a travelling

role, as an essential job condition. Nevertheless being away offers a moment for reflection, but it should not become too much.

As Global Category Manager for a specific product-group, Cindy reports directly to the Chief Purchasing Officer. Although this is an important position hierarchically, she relativises the perceived importance for/of her role. Cindy feels valued in her job and experiences a high degree of involvement. Cindy considers her relationship with her employer simply as good. She attaches importance both to the economic-financial and to the social aspect. The job content and variation therein take priority over the financial reward, although the salary should be at the appropriate level. Cindy considers neither the company, nor a specific person as her employer, but the people from the business unit itself, the people with whom she collaborates, the internal clients.

According to Cindy, the mutually perceived obligations within her working relationship are being properly met (both Cindy and her supervisor have for their responsibility this purpose and fulfil it accordingly). Consequently, there are and were no breach situations experienced. Cindy certainly sees herself performing her current function for another few years. In relation to her future career path, there are still many possibilities open. A new, interesting role with her current employer is the preferred option, yet she is – from a flexible, neutral mind-set – not opposed to switching to another company or to another sector.

5.1.3. THE STORY OF BILL

Bill (♂) is 40 years old, single/unmarried and has no children. Bill is a qualified civil engineer and holds a Master's degree in applied economic sciences. Bill is a Senior Consultant with a Flemish IT service provider experiencing strong (international) growth, specialised in implementing SAP and Microsoft-related solutions. As a SAP consultant, the main duties for Bill consist of having IT solutions analysed, implemented and monitored. As a

Senior Consultant, Bill also has a coordinating task over the projects and the team of junior consultants.

Bill has been working for this company for four years, the last two years of which in an IBT position. He had previously acquired some international work experience with (two) internationally operating production companies. In recent years, his employer has evolved from a local player to a player with international clients (and subsidiaries). Within this growing framework, Bill seized the (sudden) opportunity to start working internationally. The number and the duration of the business trips are heavily dependent on the project and the client being worked for. This does not involve any regularity, but on average travelling occurs at least once a month. Bill is at present working on two major international accounts. For one account, he is responsible for the global roll-out of a software package, which means that he travels to North and South America, Europe and Asia. These trips then last for instance one week, but the stay can be extended at the client's request. The other account currently involves a small-scale project mainly with trips of a number of days to the UK. Bill finds the cultural and social experiences along with the international travel/work exhilarating; it is his wish to remain working in an international context in the future.

Bill considers his job important. This importance and appreciation is formulated in the relationship with, and the feedback from, colleagues and clients. Hierarchically Bill reports to a firm-partner, but he does not derive the importance of this role from this. Bill really enjoys performing his job. He draws this high job satisfaction from the content attractiveness, the personal enrichment when working, the relationship with clients and colleagues, as well as from the international aspect of the job.

Bill certainly does not consider his relationship with this employer as purely economic. Despite the fact that Bill works in a bipartite constellation with his consultancy activity – in which both the client and his employer occupy an instructing role – he sees the company in which he legally works as his employer and not one person. Bill evaluates the satisfaction on his working

partnership as slightly above average. For him, it is the relationship with customers that is important. According to Bill, a current feeling of unhappiness concerning financial rewards to be provided for travelling is affecting his psychological contract satisfaction, nevertheless without unbalancing it. With a degree of reservation and without explicit certainty, Bill sees his relationship with the current employer as long term. In relation to his future career path, there are still many opportunities open. It is essential for Bill that he can broaden his horizons.

5.1.4. THE STORY OF KEVIN

Kevin (♂) is 35 years old, married and has five children. His wife works part-time as a clerk at an HR service provider. Kevin is trained as an industrial engineer, electro-mechanics. He works for a Swedish multinational specialised in supplying industrial solutions (air and gas compressors, generator units, construction and mining equipment, industrial tools and assembly systems). He is currently Solution Integration Manager and responsible for designing an entirely new business process (to be supported with SAP) for the sales entities in the company. The project is borne on corporate level and runs over 80 countries.

Kevin has been working for this company for ten years, the last seven years of which in an IBT role. He joined the company after quitting a non-international engineering job at the company in which he undertook his (study-related) traineeships. The number and the duration of the business trips are at present varying, and depend on the project/locations of the implementation. The travelling involves trips to the headquarters in Sweden, but also to distant locations such as China, India, the US, Brazil; trips averaging one week. While Kevin does not find the actual travelling and the waiting times associated with this pleasant, the drive to be away is unfaltering and motivated. He in the future certainly wishes to continue performing an IBT job – Kevin would also be interested in an expat life.

Kevin believes his role is important, a degree of importance that is derived on the one hand from the content-related aspect – the project in which he is currently involved is important for the future of the company; on the other hand because the project concerned is prestigious (to him) and has direct CEO support. In theory, hierarchically there is one other person between Kevin and the CEO, namely the Business Area President to whom Kevin reports. Kevin himself has 15 people in his team, but he does not derive the importance or valuation from this.

The relationship that Kevin has with his employer is halfway between an economic-financial relationship and a long-term partnership. Kevin attaches considerable and great importance to the financial aspect. Nonetheless, Kevin also finds the relational and family company aspect extremely important. Kevin considers the company and organisation as his employer and not a person.

According to Kevin, the mutual psychological contract obligations within his current deal are fulfilled well to very well. No perceived obligations have yet been breached. Kevin reports high employer trust; however, it is unlikely that this will be in the exact same role (as performed nowadays). Kevin has a good idea of what his subsequent role might be; his company-career path is – at least for him – mapped out. His wishes in this regard also appear to have been made clear to this employer. In the hypothetical situation where Kevin nevertheless switched to another employer, the financial factor is the only decisive one.

5.1.5. THE STORY OF SAM

Sam (♂) is 35 years old, single/divorced and has no children. Sam is a trained English/Spanish translator. He studied for six months in Valencia (Spain) in the context of an Erasmus programme. Sam currently works as an Export Manager at a Flemish medium-sized textile company, active in manufacturing and importing bath and kitchen linen. The company's sales

operations are divided into four teams: Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, France and a group of all other European countries. Sam is responsible for this latter group and has five people under his direct responsibility in a self-managing sales support team. He furthermore supervises a Lithuanian seller who operates in the Baltic States, Poland and Russia. Apart from this supervision and the geographical team arrangement, Sam is additionally responsible for selling to a major international discounter (13 countries). He reports directly to the Sales Director, who is a member of the Board of Directors.

In the thirteen years that he has been working for this company Sam's role has evolved from a purely office support sales force to an external sales job. He has gradually developed in this role, both in terms of responsibilities and the countries within his portfolio. The scope of this evolution implies that Sam has already been working in an IBT role for more than ten years. At present, Sam is abroad on average two days out of five, with a maximum duration of two days per trip. As far as business travel is concerned, this mainly involves trips to Spain and as well as to a lesser degree the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic States, Poland and Russia. International travel was not a conscious choice for Sam, although he currently believes it mattering much. For him, the added value lies in always dealing with new people/situations; a fixed, internal office job does not appeal to Sam.

The company has a reasonable horizontal structure whereby there is both formal and informal contact with the two managers (company owners). For Sam, it is essential that there is this active consultation. Through the responsibilities of the job and Sam's own assessment concerning what he means for the company, he evaluates his own role as important. Sam looks upon the relationship with this employer as a close partnership and expresses his satisfaction in this regard. Neither employer obligations, nor promises, are broken at present; nevertheless in the past Sam experienced the stagnation of and non-transparency concerning managerial action/change as problematic.

Sam himself feels that the current partnership, with his first and only employer, involves more than a purely economic deal. However, he believes the financial aspect associated with this employment to be elementary. In the context concerned whereby the financial issue is explicitly important, Sam therefore considers the CEO (one of two present) who sees to the bonus scheme and results as his employer. Sam assigns a long-term perspective to the relationship with his employer; nonetheless, he is open for something new, externally. For him, the international aspect is not an essential requirement in that respect, but rather instead good/better financial conditions – although Sam is currently satisfied in this regard.

5.1.6. THE STORY OF FLORENCE

Florence (♀) is 42 years old, married and has a 13-year-old son. Her husband works partly as a wage-earner and partly as self-employed with his own catering company. After having studied Latin and Greek, Florence took law for two years at university and a three-year course in marketing at a polytechnic. Florence currently works as an Import Director at a Flemish medium-sized textile company, active in manufacturing and importing bath and kitchen linen. Florence constitutes the direct line with the company's suppliers on a technical, operational and strategic level. As Import Director she manages a team of staff, both in Belgium and abroad where she works with local agents (e.g. India and Pakistan) who are responsible for the planning, coordination and quality controls. Florence is a member of the Management Committee and also attends the Board (of Directors) meetings (although she is not an appointed member).

Florence has been working for this company for 21 years, as the second employer in her career. With the exception of the first two years, the international aspect has always been present. International travel arrived slowly and increased with the growth of the organisation. The business travel mainly involves the countries India, Pakistan and Egypt. There is furthermore travel to China, Portugal and Turkey, but to a lesser degree. On average it

comes down to Florence being away at least every for four to five days every two months. If the travel is of a purely technical nature, Florence is accompanied by one of the company's two CEOs. The international travel is rather random in this role, but Florence enjoys it. Besides a moment of peace, for Florence travel is also a release valve and a time to assess/to start to relativise conflict situations.

Florence believes her role to be extremely important – not her personally, but purchasing per se. Florence has a good – in her own words – bespoke partnership with her employer whereby the interpersonal relationship takes priority over the financial/economic aspect. The financial aspect associated with her partnership is for her not at all decisive; however, it has to give her the freedom to be able to do what she wants with her life. Florence feels a complete and full-fledged part of the company; she gives herself to it unconditionally. Her employer – and Florence is quite formal on this point – is the one who pays her.

Given the long working relationship with her employer and the intensity of this, within the scope of the psychological contract the mutual obligations have grown organically yet/always from a win-win point of view. Florence has a special ('customised'), inspiring and free relationship with her employer that she evaluates with the utmost satisfaction – no broken promises, but discussible and changing obligations determine her relationship. Florence is herself always seeking out something new, although with her current employer as she is loyal thorough and through. She cannot see herself leaving; instead she sees herself evolving further within the company, with ever more responsibilities and greater freedom.

5.1.7. THE STORY OF MARC

Marc (♂) is 29 years old, lives with his girlfriend and does not have any children. His girlfriend is self-employed and performs the sales and marketing for a company that sells food supplements. Besides his salaried job, Marc

also has a (one-man) company active in the e-commerce of food supplements. Marc took a Bachelor's course in communication management. He is an Export Sales Manager with a Flemish SME active in flax-weaving industry. His duty is to see to sales and prospection (also through trade fairs) in the markets assigned to him. Besides his clients in Belgium, for Marc these markets involve Germany, the Netherlands, South Africa and Asia. Secondary markets include Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Marc sells to distributors, brand manufacturers, editors and goes to designers who are working on specific projects (such as hotels). He works directly under the company owner, but he also supervises a number of people, in particular the Office Sales Manager and the Quality Manager.

Marc has been working for this company since 2011, after having performed other, several, sales roles with various employers – which also, but not always, involved an international aspect. Ever since recruitment, Marc's position has been characterised by international business travel. In terms of division of time, Marc spends almost half his time abroad. Depending on the destination, the average travel time is one week (Asia, South Africa) to two to four days (Italy, Scandinavia). One-day trips to, for instance, the Netherlands and Germany are also made. For Marc, working as an IBT and doing business internationally is an entirely conscious and resolute choice; an ambition and lifestyle from which he cannot deter.

Marc believes his role is important, yet at the same time realises that he is dependent on the entire production process and its quality. Marc enjoys doing his job, he feels the appreciation of his employer with whom, in his own opinion, he has a good relationship (if not the best of the company). Marc considers the manager (company owner) as his employer, and the employment contract was also concluded with this person. He categorises his employer relationship as a strictly economic and purely professional connection, without avoiding social occasions – on the contrary. For Marc, the financial aspect within his working and living context certainly is of significant value. In Marc's mind-set, doing something 'well' means doing something '*with a positive financial outcome*'.

Marc evaluates his psychological contract with his current employer as fairly well fulfilled, and not marked by any breach experiences. As far as the future relationship is concerned, everything ultimately rests on a written clause in his employment contract on the payment of commissions being implemented. Under the assumption that this financial aspect will be sorted out, Marc estimates his retention behaviour with the same employer as high (which does not characterise his career). Nonetheless, he always remains open to an attractive financial proposal from another company.

5.1.8. THE STORY OF ANDY

Andy (♂) is 28 years old, married and currently has no children. Andy has a Master's degree in applied economic sciences. His wife works as a process analyst for a supermarket chain, and she is expecting their first child. Andy is a Business Analyst with a Flemish multinational active in the crane-hire sector, heavy transport and industrial assembly. In his current role, whereby Andy collaborates and reports directly to the CEO, he has an entirely diverse package of duties. His main activity is Mergers & Acquisitions, a second package of responsibility involves developing management reporting, whereby he manages three people. A third job aspect is Market Intelligence (market research within the scope of projects, acquisitions, and competition analysis), for which he has two people in his team. A fourth aspect is internal project management (Project Management Office), for which he manages one person. Furthermore, his fifth duty involves general CEO support. Andy is also a member of the corporate Management Team.

Andy has been working for his current employer for three years, within an IBT role from the start. He had already acquired limited international experience through his first job in the financial industry. Andy is presently on average abroad one week a month for work reasons, varying from two days to two weeks. The business trips are not to any specific region or country, but are worldwide to every continent (Malaysia, India, Latin America, Canada, South Africa, etc.). For Andy, the international aspect of the job is certainly

important, and he finds it pleasant. He is above all keen to meet new people (within a work context) and to experience how trade/work is performed in other countries.

Given his position in the company Andy fulfils a crucial role; however, he himself relativises the importance of this. Andy has an extremely good, yet purely professional, relationship with the CEO. Despite the direct relationship that Andy has with the CEO – the person who, together with HR, took him on – he sees the company, the group as his employer. The interests of the company take priority over the personal relationship with the CEO. Andy feels supported from other corners of the organisation (his teams), as well as from the Board of Directors, and is extremely satisfied with this.

Andy considers the relationship with his employer as a kind of ‘give and take’ partnership infused with mutual respect. The financial aspect is important in this partnership up to a certain level; still, Andy looks and seeks further than just the financial element. The job content on itself and the freedom/responsibility to carry the work in his own way are more determinant. Up to now, no promises have been broken within Andy’s psychological contract deal; although he does cite that this has in fact happened to others employees and that this is always at the back of his mind. Andy sees his relationship with his employer as a convincingly long-term engagement, yet he realises that nowadays job security is unstable.

5.1.9. THE STORY OF WALTER

Walter (♂) is 40 years old, divorced/cohabitating and has no children. He studied A1 Mechanics, and his girlfriend/wife works in the clothes industry. Walter is currently working at a multinational company (with sites in seven countries) specialised in producing glass moulds (manufactured from cast iron and bronze) and engine parts.

Walter has been working for this company for six years, in a managerial, project-related position within the technical team. His fixed Belgian employment base changed a year and a half ago due to an alteration project in which Walter plays a leading technical role. International travel has been present since starting employment in this company, while international work execution such as this was not part of Walter's previous two technical-commercial employments. In the initial years with his current employer, travelling was extremely intensive: on average two full weeks a month, on account of a new production activity in Romania in 2007. He then also visited other countries (US, UK, Turkey, Croatia, Slovenia), although less frequently. Nowadays, international travel is (for the time being) less intensive. The international travel only involves inter-company trips to the aforementioned countries with an average duration of around one week, and a clear target stipulation for each week-long project/trip. Walter did not necessarily start at his current employer in order to travel internationally, although he enjoys doing so. His interest in travel (with associated new projects/tasks) is explained on the one hand by his eagerness for results and on the other hand because he likes human contact. Walter wishes to continue travelling in the future, but is not prepared for an expatriate position since he attaches a great deal of importance to his social life in here.

Walter evaluates his current position/role as important. He senses the appreciation of his importance due to his being listened to with confidence, in particular by one of the company owners. Walter considers his plant manager (and not the familial company owner) as his direct employer. He himself says that he has a good relationship with this person. Walter indicates furthermore that he has a professional understanding and that he is on the same, comfortable wavelength with his employer.

Walter enjoys working at this company and is overall genuinely satisfied with his current working relationship. This relationship is labelled as partly economic and partly social – with both elements in balance. Walter attaches importance to the financial aspect within his employment deal, but links the financial recognition directly with his performance.

For Walter, there is a clear intention of a long-term relationship and the ambition, albeit a realistic one, to develop further in the company. Walter's confidence in his employer and satisfaction concerning the psychological contract fulfilment endure with conviction, despite the fact that a certain unwritten employer promise (relating to a company car) has not at present been kept. The unease and disappointment linked with this non-fulfilled promise could (at some point) constitute a relationship breaking point. However, they by no means currently form any immediate/effective threat of partnership termination.

5.2. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The second part of this data analysis concerns a presentation of the cross-case thematic analysis performed. In this section, there is no search for *the* answer to the question of how Belgian IBTs interpret their psychological contract; instead, a general exploration is presented of appropriate experiences and essences concerning the IBT psychological contract. The perceptions of mutual work-related obligations were examined from the IBT employee's side. Although, in accordance with the foregoing background stories, certain IBTs occupy a management position or are positioned high up in the company hierarchy, their experiences have been catalogued/interpreted under the perspective of employee – which the persons involved in fact are, according to Belgian legislation. The freelance side-job of one of the respondents (Marc) did not give rise to any broadened research angle, and was not further included for investigation.

The three proposed sub-research questions are in what follows dealt with successively based on the themes encountered (in accordance with the method described in the research design section of this work – see 4.5. DATA ANALYSIS-METHOD). Personal comments, critical remarks and links to other studies are provided where relevant/possible throughout the theme presentations.

5.2.1. THE ROLE OF THE IBT

The thematic (highlighting) analysis relating to the first sub-research question, informatively gauging ‘the role of the IBT’, only delivered limited yet specific/clear themes.

As can be found in the concepts overview in the appendices (appendix 7.5. *ROLE OF THE IBT: CONCEPTS, SUB-THEMES AND THEMES*), various concepts and sub-themes were indicated when individually analysing the interview transcripts. The cross-case analysis-exercise performed grouped the indications found to two general ‘super-ordinate’ themes: ‘role’ and ‘importance’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, p. 96). These themes have furthermore been referred to and broadly interpreted as follows: ‘the multifarious, intercultural, IBT role’ and ‘the IBT as a strategic resource’.

Since the first sub-research question – as explained at the start of this work (see 1.2. *RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES*) – was brought to the fore with the principle aim of facilitating the understanding of the inquiry directly relating to the psychological contract, the limitation found in the themes is deemed a satisfactory outcome. The two themes are dealt with below in their generality, with what I interpret as the essential IBT role-elements discerned.

The multifarious, intercultural, IBT role

The diversity that corresponds with the role of IBTs who were part of this study was striking, and can also be found when considering the individual stories presented above.

Both inter-firm and intra-firm roles were distinguished, without one of these roles solely determining the position of the IBTs interviewed. However, a slight propensity to the inter-company aspect was noticed, which could actually be supposed from the job title of the IBTs interviewed (see mention in table 7).

The **inter-firm** roles shared by the IBTs were situated on the general commercial level and are distinguished by a relational supplier or client focus. These foci varied from starting up, maintaining or to restoring relationships with the partners concerned. The IBTs involved, in particular: Nils, Cindy, Bill, Sam, Florence and Marc, each dealt with these matters in their own manner. Nils for example stated that his role towards retaining and maintaining clients was customised and synchronised entirely to the wishes of the other party (client) – he mentioned always *‘to be’* there selflessly for clients should they need. This vision/devotion is also discussed in greater detail later in this work with the analysis of the psychological contract obligations (5.2.2. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE IBT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: THE CONTRACT CONTENT AND NATURE). In contrast, Marc described his inter-firm role from a rather general, less customised, marketing-oriented viewpoint: *‘I have to present collections (...) and show these to customers or prospects, anywhere’*. Providing company representation at events and/or trade fairs was also consequently viewed as a role characterising aspect by Marc. Cindy stated with professional, down-to-earth seriousness to be responsible for *‘the entire strategy surrounding supplier management concerning dies, spools and packaging’*. Her inter-firm role is characterised by an enterprising touch, since amongst other things both *‘market research’* for finding new suppliers and *‘negotiating important contracts oneself’* turned out to be assigned to Cindy. Florence added in this context of supplier-management that maintaining and restoring relationships or resolving conflict situations with them, has to be interpreted as an extremely serious role and one to be performed with dedication. For her, respect for and a rapid, yet proper, adjustment to different cultural mores prove to be essential factors for such an inter-company role aspect. She specifically stated this as follows: *‘I’ll eat everything they eat, I adapt to their food, I adapt myself to everything. I adapt to their customs, I also adapt to the clothing – I never go veiled, that’s going a bit too far (...) Always a long skirt, leggings, even in the middle of summer, you soon get used to that clothing, all of my blouses have long sleeves. In those countries you’re not allowed to have bare shoulders, that a part of your wrists are bare, that’s*

just not done. All of my blouses thus have long sleeves, in silk because it's really hot... walking around in blouses with long sleeves in 50°C, but all of it's very light material, so I adapt. That's also partnership with your suppliers, you have to adapt to those people, that you understand them and that you're open to it [their culture/customs], that way you'll be able to 'see' a lot more of those people. I try to experience those people's situation. I'll adapt my travel style to that, even in hours.' It should hereby immediately be noted that cultural issues within the IBT's work context have a broader scope than merely the national company differences/qualities with which non-international operating professionals deal with. Intercultural situations/settings are less extensively to not at all present in national positions, although in principle an identical functional role – such as inter-company import or sales – may be assigned. In addition, the unfixed geographical diversity in working implies for IBTs a supplementary and also multicultural facet to be overcome. The brief contacts that characterise business travel (of the IBTs involved in this study at least) do not generally permit familiarity with a social culture in full/in depth. Nils revealed the transitory nature such as this of an internationally travelling position with the following example: *'I actually had my most difficult period abroad between, er, in their [his children's] first year. I was then genuinely away three weeks out of four. At the time with [ex-employer] I did the US, Turkey and the Middle East, that was really intensive travelling. That was, er, up 72 hours, thus Brussels – Munich, Munich – Dubai, Dubai – New York, New York – Frankfurt and back home [Nils laughs].'* Nevertheless, a fast awareness of cultural differences and being able to set one's own assumptions/misassumptions aside was found to be crucial for role-performance. In this regard, IBTs therefore also differ from expatriates since the latter mentioned assignees remain at one/a location for a longer time, which facilitates cultural integration with the host-country nationals (Shaffer et al 2012).

Intra-firm roles, as another IBT main role besides inter-company activity, were in the main characterised by a project notion. A project role such as this ranged from performing oneself to taking the lead in a project as done

by Walter and Kevin, for instance, to coordinating a project management office as one of the various roles that Andy described being associated with this position. Knowledge absorption and sharing were at the same time cited in and associated with a project role such as this. Kevin illustrated this as follows: *'I went to a place, for a full analysis, to map out what they do in a customer centre. What they do there, and the activities that they do there, how they do that, in order to see how they do it here and how they do it there (...) The role I now have is, you design something new [based on the aforementioned study performed previously], it [the mapped-out procedure] is a new way of working and we're going to explain it to the people ourselves. That's actually what we do now. Training the people, having the people learn.'* Walter stated – in contrast with Kevin's role described as *'strategic'* – that his mission to share experience should rather be seen as purely *'technical'*. His input nevertheless appeared to be crucial and required in order to start up new business entities (from a production point of view). Once again – and just like with the inter-firm reports – in this intra-firm role context the IBTs' capacity to adjust to various cultures constituted a substantial element of their role realisation. Walter specifically described his many-sided and extremely opposing ways of working: in Turkey he is/was expected, in accordance with local customs, to act in a directive fashion in order to lead the people like *'pack animals'*; in Romania he stated to achieve more with his project team by *'putting himself on the same level'* and *'going to have pints'* with them after meeting a deadline. According to Walter, not everyone is suited to this adjustment of role performance, although an intercultural flexibility such as this is crucial.

The multifariousness which characterised the IBT role performance was furthermore enhanced by, amongst other things, the **combinations of inter and intra-firm roles/sub-roles**. This mix was directly and above all instigated by the broad package of duties that are part of certain managerial IBT positions. Cindy defined therefore her role as *'... a bit of everything, really'*. The examples of role execution that Andy stated throughout the interview were also always characterised by diversity in both specific

operations and internal/external foci: *'(...) it might be for instance that the CEO says OK we want to start something in Indonesia. Look up something about it, what are the regulations there, what projects are present there, and so on. So it could be that I just do it through secondary research or that I instruct my internal people to go and look up as much as possible on the internet. Then we switch over to primary [research], then people start calling around, and so on, perhaps going [to investigate/negotiate] at the location if that's necessary, for example that's something that also belongs to my package of duties, that's definitely part of it. Then the acquisitions, there you're always with externals, as well as internals, but also a lot with externals, with the sellers and the sellers' advisers (...).'* The convergence of internal and external roles was not only established at hierarchical (high) positions, with overarching responsibilities – as in the case of Andy. Marc for instance also illustrated that his main inter-company sales role is inextricably supplemented with intra-company aspects: *'Because I of course also have to go and look in the back office, since I really have to check a lot whether everything's OK. (...) Certainly textile, quality, colours, etc. well, that's always... how should I say it... those things can change from time to time. It's important, to maintain quality high, that we can also keep an eye on it ourselves.'*

In parallel to the aforementioned substantive diversity in role-execution and the exemplified cultural complexity, the IBT's role is always – and contrary to domestic positions – considered as intrinsically multi-faceted in the respect that **IBTs work both from a home country and international basis**. In connection with this, it should be noted that the IBTs of this study all interact with several countries, both EU and non-EU, which makes their international basis extremely broad and dynamic. A dual and diversified work context such as this differentiates the IBT (again) from the traditional expatriate, as also remarked by Welch, Welch and Worm (2007, p. 181). Consequently grasping and communicating information and knowledge without misunderstandings emerged as challenging in the IBTs' double and assorted working world. An extremely clear, reliable and verifiable cooperation pact between colleagues on both the home and abroad bases proved to be essential, but not

untroublesome. The impossibility of physical monitoring and the sporadic face-to-face contact obliged the IBTs to adapt to new reporting and collaboration scenarios. The approach for setting up and preserving a network such as this, to be newly built up, appeared to occur on a wholly individualised basis, dependent of the travel frequency and specific role of each IBT. Kevin illustrated his coordination network set up, which is virtual and rather extreme, as follows: *'I once had a team of more than 40, and I never saw those people. I was almost never with them, I was always away and the team was also always away, they were also 'travelling'. That then meant I needed a reporting structure that's completely different. You then have to find other ways, you nevertheless have to monitor each other, you still have to manage the people, and then it's mainly a lot of reporting. Making phone calls, writing reports, etc. Making calls is extremely important for us, I would so, wherever you are in the world, you can always reach any other side of the world. That's really important as it's often the case – perhaps you could say it's bad management – it's often the case that my boss or colleagues don't know where those others are. It just so happens that we're going to Germany and that we're all in the same time zone, but we don't know where the others are. We start trying to make contact early in the morning and late at night to consult, what has happened, what are the issues we need to know about, what do you know about me, for me. It's actually a kind of community, unofficial, not minuted or I don't know what, constantly calling each other, sharing information with each other. You just don't know where they are.'*

Nevertheless, continuous changes in working context may – in this case cited by one IBT (Andy) and also stated in literature (DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich 2000; Espino et al 2002; Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert 2004; Westman, Etzion and Gattenio 2008) – cause some negativity or possible problems: *'Look, if I go to South Africa for two days and then I come back. If I've endured two serious flights, I also don't feel tiptop, just to be clear. The fact is also that a lot happens and this is of course less pleasant if I go abroad, my work at the office here starts piling up. Luckily, last year I got a lot of people in, and that [the work piling up] stays restricted. But*

nevertheless when I then get back, then it's straightaway your first day at the office, you really have to get down to work. So it's really a bit...' The geographical distribution of the various parties with whom the IBTs interact imply after all a constant workflow. Physical meetings with one party or for one particular aim do not halt the activities of other parties or for other purposes within their working area. In addition, the practical time differences in the various time zones perpetuate and complicate the continuity in work: *'yes, you're in something international, the world, everything keeps going. It doesn't stop turning just because it's Sunday for us ...'* (Florence). This entails that for qualitative role execution, IBTs must not only be able to adapt to various cultures, but also possess strong organisational talent or skills in order to monitor their geographically spread out and ongoing activities. Florence illustrated this with the following passage: *'(...) I organised it in such a way that the factories are not dependent on my attendance there. As an international buyer you have to be really smart, you can really control that [supervising the factories], you can't say that I have to be there all the time. I'm not needed there if you organise that with satisfactory control systems. That girl [coordinator for factories in India] has contact people in the companies, and they were appointed by me, when I was there, it's organised so that she [the coordinator] can monitor certain key persons in each company. I'm not going to say that it always runs really well, but it's controllable. And in Pakistan I have a guy who goes to perform the quality controls and the planning. I haven't had that for so long, but also organised that now. And in India then additionally I have one key factory, I kind of make sure that we have all the products and all the price classes in every country, but I also make sure I have one key factory in each country. The fact I have one preferential supplier, that I know if I get into problems, I have that factory to fall back on. So it's very often a question of organisation, of course it's through experience that you organise, since if you don't know, it's of course by doing that you find out. And I also have a very good team here [in Belgium at the head office], which is being expanded, that does the day to day things.'* This proficiency in being able to work (and to organise work) in a diverse and multicultural work environment was named by Florence, but also by other

interviewees (although not with the same wording), several times as essential.

The IBT as a strategic resource

Consistency was found amongst all nine IBTs interviewed concerning the importance or the vital nature of their role – without in any way aiming for generalisation by stating this. The IBTs appeared – as interpreted by myself – to fulfil a crucial role for their respective organisations; independently of their position, which in this case differs. Florence, for instance, literally reported just like the others that she has a ‘*very important*’ function within the company. She immediately nuanced this by making it clear that she herself is not important, but rather her activity/role per se. Just as with Florence, an explicit confirmation of role importance was heard, amongst others, in Marc’s story; notwithstanding the person involved being, as a Sales Manager with a company seniority of two years, theoretically lower in hierarchy than Florence, who is a member of the company’s Management Committee and has twenty years’ seniority.

The feeling of importance shared that constantly reoccurred was however experienced differently for each participant. Bill indicated his statement of importance as ‘*purely intuitive*’, although nevertheless justified by the relationship with, and the feedback from, colleagues and clients. Sam evaluated his role as vital due to the heavily demonstrated involvement and the trust that the management shows him (*‘I also always receive a briefing from the Board of Directors, which other people don’t get.’*), as well as due to the responsibilities that he is assigned. He therefore sees himself no longer operating in a less valued role: *‘The clients I have are all major players, that involves [names of major international department stores]. But if I then have to go to a client for 100 units, I wouldn’t want to do that anymore. It [the customer and the deal] must have a certain importance.’* Andy related importance to the significant, rather financial, influence that his work has on the company’s result. Specifically, an influence on turnover and EBITA was

cited. The notion of importance was also created by referring to a – not directly visible – financial benefit lacking in the future (if he would have left the company): *‘And if they get rid of me and they then go to make an acquisition, they possibly won’t do it in the right way. Because they don’t know how they should do it, and maybe in five years they’ll start losing money on it since they haven’t negotiated it properly.’* Just like with Andy, Walter’s experience of importance was associated with the possibility being able to start up financially beneficial, technical initiatives for the company, and thus to create an advantage. He mentioned that there is nevertheless no verbally expressed recognition of importance in his work context: *‘and you shouldn’t expect any thanks’*, but that doesn’t bother him. Walter instead reported that he feels the recognition of importance from his employer through receiving a figurative *‘pat on the back’* which for him means increased flexibility (*‘come on, go home... you’ve already been here enough the last few months...’*).

In accordance with Florence’s nuancing of importance (reported above), certain respondents relativised and depersonalised their key role cited. Cindy, for instance, defined this vigorously by stating that *‘the work doesn’t fall apart’* if she isn’t there and thereby referred to her absence/maternity leave. Nevertheless, at another point in the discussion, she cited having *‘jumped in during my maternity leave... a little from home, but really just the most essential things’* that might nonetheless refer to the strategic importance of her presence (whether or not at a distance) in company matters. Andy also showed a strong capacity to put the crucial or critical nature of his role into perspective – although he experienced it with a certain objective/rather quantitative approach as important (see his quote presented above).

One interviewee, Nils, commented that his experience of role importance corresponds with and has changed with the internal evolution of the company. A new organisation structure (merger of two sector giants), the mixing of employees from various departments, and consequently an adjusted hierarchical structure meant he felt his role was becoming less

important. The decision lines that had developed longer and the reduced autonomy to decide matters for oneself were for Nils indicators of decreased role importance: *'(...) if you're then the lowest, you get listened to less, don't you?'* Having a certain responsibility, being able to lead and assuming responsibility formed all aspects that amongst other respondents, just as with Nils, were linked with the importance appreciation of their IBT role. However, increased responsibility was not named as an indicator for growing role importance (as reverse evolution of that which Nils shared). Neither did the participants of this study make any link between the changes concerning the travel aspect (number of countries or number of trips) associated with IBT role execution and the appreciation of the role's importance in general.

5.2.2. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE IBT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: THE CONTRACT CONTENT AND NATURE

The obligations that have emerged from this study's exploratory investigation as essentially characteristic of the IBT psychological contract content were compiled into ten encompassing themes. The themes exhibiting a number of sub-themes are condensed in the following table (*table 9*). This table includes an allotment of each theme/sub-theme found according to either employer or employee obligation. Both the noted content-related themes and sub-themes must and can be interpreted as separate key obligations indicative of the IBT psychological contract; thus in point of fact eighteen obligations were identified as essential (see also number indication in the table).²⁸

²⁸ The full details of the theme determination can be found in the appendices (appendix 7.6. LIST OF SUB-THEMES AND THEMES).

Table 9: summary of key-obligations within the content of the psychological contract

| EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS |
|--|--|
| | Role behaviour: n° 1: in-role behaviour n° 2: extra-role behaviour n° 3: proactive role behaviour |
| n° 4: support | |
| n° 5: flexibility | |
| Job content n° 6: responsibility n° 7: travel n° 8: diversity | |
| n° 9: freedom | |
| | n° 10: loyalty |
| Development: n° 11: vertical n° 12: horizontal n° 13: personal | |
| Social atmosphere: n° 14: family n° 15: work atmosphere – collegiality n° 16: respect and trust | |
| n° 17: financial rewards | |
| n° 18: open relation | |

From a strictly theoretical point of view, a psychological contract nature indication could be proposed by providing the content components enumerated a relational or transactional label. The table below (*table 10*) presents a nature-indicating interpretation such as this by comparing the obligations put forward as key contract components (and incorporated in *table 9*) with the labelling that Atkinson (2007b) reported in her work. The table concerned also contains, on the far right, an extra column stating the combinations of themes with which the explanation of the description of findings following below has been structured. These combinations were put

together in a well-considered yet personal manner, based on interpretations of the participant information examined.

Table 10: summary of key-obligations within the content of the psychological contract, with an indication to their nature and the resulting thematic combinations

| EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS | THEME COMBINATIONS WITH DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS |
|---|---|---|
| | Role behaviour: in-role behaviour: transactional extra-role behaviour: relational proactive role behaviour: relational | <i>IBT role behaviour: hand in hand with support and flexibility employers are obliged to provide</i> |
| Support: transactional/relational | | |
| Flexibility: relational | | |
| Job content: responsibility: relational travel: relational diversity: relational | | <i>An attractive and diverse IBT job content... to be provided by the employer, although... with a hefty dash of freedom!</i> |
| Freedom: relational | | |
| | Loyalty: relational | <i>The IBT: a committed human resource... although only within an inspiring work environment with development opportunities</i> |
| Development: vertical: transactional horizontal: relational personal: relational | | |
| Social atmosphere: family: relational work atmosphere – collegiality: relational respect and trust: relational | | |
| Financial rewards: transactional | | <i>The ambiguity (?) concerning IBT financial rewards</i> |
| Open relation: relational | | <i>Meeting of minds as the basis for a solid collaboration</i> |

The following analysis-passage is constructed according to the above-advanced combination of themes as to present the common threads (in

particular the themes and sub-themes identified) of both the content and the nature of the IBTs' psychological contract with their current employers. Working with self-devised sentence constructions such as these corresponds with the vision of van Manen (1990) who promotes freedom and creativity in writing phenomenological analysis texts.

IBT role behaviour: hand in hand with support and flexibility employers are obliged to provide

The theme of **role behaviour** involves a psychological contract dimension that clearly emerged within every IBT's psychological-contract content discussion – both with equal and differing interpretation, without nevertheless having found extreme opposing positions regarding this perceived employee obligation. Role behaviour was differentiated through the analysis performed into three sub-themes, each representing a key-obligation of the psychological contract: in-role, extra-role and proactive behaviour (terms that are explained below).

In this study **in-role** obligations are interpreted – as Bal et al (2010, p. 383) proscribe – as 'obligations that belong within the work as standard, such as efficient working and good collaboration with colleagues'. This type of transactionally tinted employee obligation was invariably named by all of the interviewees as a basis and an aspect that is automatically provided/also present within their psychological contract. The IBTs consulted held the logical principle that '*the work must be done*' (Bill) in high esteem. This attitude was additionally coloured, at least for instance by Bill, with a certain sense of quality: '*I want to deliver quality in what I do to the client. And these major clients also ask for that; you also get time and space for it. (...) Following my studies I worked there with [organisation of Japanese origin] for seven years. When you work with Japanese people, they're respectful, they want quality, it has to be good. That's also my vision, I've been somewhat brainwashed [by the Japanese experience]...*' With regard to in-role obligations Kevin stated further and clearly: '*It's actually very simple. They*

[the employer] expect us to accomplish the mission... They [the employer] expect nothing more nothing less than for us to accomplish it...' If this basic employee obligation were not present, in accordance with Kevin this may imply a – for him entirely understandable – career end.

As also included in the above noted definition of in-role obligations, being able to collaborate with colleagues was by the interviewees mentioned almost in the same breath as the desire for good/high quality work referred to. Cindy expressed this briefly yet robustly with the following assertion: *'(...) it is the intention, amongst colleagues, that everyone helps each other.'* Consultation and sharing information with colleagues turned out to be aspects inherently connected with the IBTs' role performance. In the opinion of the IBTs questioned, it is simply obligatory to provide the employer with this kind of behaviour. This obligation did not emerge as being new or surprising since, for instance, the study of Sels et al (2000) also discusses on the one hand the quality-oriented work attitude and on the other hand the significance of good working relationships with colleagues amongst Belgian employees; without nevertheless infringing on their monetary principal focus. However, as reported when discussing the IBT's role, the practical aspect associated with this communicative employee obligation is extremely complex and challenging, given the inter-country/culture context that characterises an IBT role.

An additional noteworthy, yet at the same time logical, element within the in-role behaviour psychological contract dimension of the IBT involves the reference to travel. Dealing correctly with the travel component within the IBT role was considered a conscious element – in this study put under the heading of in-role employee obligations – that is not established in writing/explicitly. This as 'standard' expected employee obligation was expressed, amongst other things, in references to the frequency or the purpose of the travel: *'That fact that you aren't just travelling to show your face, but that there's also something connected to it...'* (Cindy) (Bal et al 2010, p. 383). The obligatory behaviour concerned consequently also came under discussion with the description of how travel budgets should be dealt

with: *'travel is expensive; your employer has to be able to trust you, that you have such an attitude that you do it as a good custodian. For me, it's something like what I wouldn't do in my private life; I also wouldn't do in my work...'* (Florence). Nils also illustrated this, but with a more practical flair: *'I also work by the motto that if you do something, don't do anything you wouldn't also do at home. If you wouldn't drink two bottles of wine at home, don't drink two bottles when you're travelling.'*

In exchange for the specific sense of responsibility in relation to business travelling as an in-role obligation element, the IBTs interviewed expected some **support** from their employer. The support requirement, which the IBTs assumed to be provided by the employer, was interpreted by some of them extremely functionally and in a rather transactional manner. For instance, Walter expressed not having assigned many obligations to his employer for his own IBT position, yet he resolutely stated the following requirement: *'I want a good bed and a good shower'* – in relation to this, without revealing to have any extreme or high expectations. Andy, Kevin and Marc followed Walter in his requirement: for them, providing good accommodation close to the place of work was also an onus or basic necessity for performing their activities. Kevin interpreted the theme of support more broadly and also relationally: *'And then once you're there, what I think they have to give you as a company, that you don't end up losing your way (...) that you're taken care of there, by the host, that you're received in the company as a guest (...). That means that they'll eat with you, they show you where you can go in the area, etc., that you're not left to fend for yourself.'* With regard to national (yet non-travelling) roles, a somewhat practical tinted support requirement such as this appears to be typical of IBT contracts and specifically related to their mobile work style. Furthermore and notwithstanding the variation in practical interpretation of employer support illustrated above, the IBTs only focused the application of the obligation on themselves. It was not mentioned in any of the interviews that the employer has to provide functional support for the IBT's home base or family (at least if this was present). In this respect, the IBTs interviewed therefore differ from expatriates who, as stated in the

literature, desire (rather nurturing) support in and alongside work for both themselves and their family (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997).

Nevertheless, five of the nine IBTs – in particular Nils, Cindy, Bill, Sam and Andy – additionally saw the support obligation as separate from the international (applied) aspect, and stated that they expect a certain amount of guidance from the employer or direct manager on their job execution. In this then more relational context, being able to fall back on some support or acquiring advice in order to improve the way assignments are handled was seen as essential for qualitative in-role behaviour. The IBTs interviewed mentioned training, provided as support by the employer, only in a rather limited manner. Although it appeared evident that training can be taken; clearly relevant for the job – no course on *'table arrangement'*, as Marc ironically commented. However, certain IBTs reported seeing greater added value in on-the-job experience than in taking training – in particular when intercultural training came under discussion. Kevin specifically stated the following: *'I was in Bahrain, for instance. In Islam you don't shake women's hands. Although they're just in the same office and do the same work as anyone else, they don't shake hands with women. So I didn't know that and you're friendly and then a person comes to you and just says 'in Islam we don't shake hands, it's not offensive, but we just don't do it.' That person explains it. You don't feel embarrassed because it's explained to you, and that's really important, that there's someone who can explain this. But training... I don't think that's necessary, I think it's much more important that there's a local person who takes you along and who shows you everything.'* In connection with this intercultural training, Kevin did indeed signal that training is provided to executives who go abroad for longer periods, without suggesting this is in any way superfluous – in contrast with providing this for short international stays.

A second sub-theme and relational key-obligation within the IBT role behaviour psychological contract dimension concerns **extra-role** employee behaviour. Referring back to Bal et al (2010, p. 382), this behaviour is defined as 'all obligations that fall outside the work-package of duties, such

as commitment, being flexible about hours and volunteering to do extra tasks'. It reflects the behaviour of an employee who is willing 'to walk an extra mile on behalf of the organisation' (Freese 2007, p. 120). A comportment such as this was highlighted by all of the IBTs, with in my own opinion considerable enthusiasm, and emphasised as being part of their employment partnership. The IBT extra-role behaviour revealed and translated itself into exceptional and broadly interpreted flexibility whereby 'a lot is given' in performance terms in order to be productive within a working environment literally and figuratively in a state of flux. So as to avoid confusion with the term 'flexibility' used below as a distinct employer obligation, the concept of extra-role behaviour is used as a synonym for an all-encompassing and partly internationally coloured employee flexibility such as this.

Walter quantified his dedication in relation to extra-role behaviour as '110 percent'. This dedication or 'giving' covered on the one side taking work home and doing extra hours (without this being requested). After all, as Walter said you should '*sleep when you're dead*'. At the other end, it likewise supposed always being prepared for immediate or longer-than-planned stays abroad. Nils referred to the latter as '*being able to switch on quickly/in the short term*'. Kevin – the father of five children – described his IBT vision concerning a flexible, extra-role, attitude somewhat more extremely: '*(...) I always have something in my suitcase, I say my suitcase but my computer bag is actually my suitcase, and in it there's always a shirt and underwear for one overnight stay. That means I can always go somewhere for one night. And that sometimes happens.*' With Florence, similar extremely broad extra-role behaviour was revealed by, for instance, the report of trips on public holidays despite her married family situation with the presence of a child/adolescent. She was also on the same wavelength as Kevin, stating that there is an enormous interrelatedness between private live and work with only limited boundaries between them, felt to be entirely normal. This is illustrated by the following quote (from the interview with Florence): '*Between Christmas Day and New Year, I had a huge problem, a contract of [customer] that could not be delivered. I therefore left on Christmas Eve and I got back at New Year, on New Year's Eve. That was such a major issue, I wasn't able*

to resolve it from here. They don't celebrate Christmas and New Year there, they aren't Christian there but mostly Muslim (laughs). So I went between Christmas Day and New Year. For me, that's... I shouldn't think about it... sure I had to organise it, that's something else. But I shouldn't think about whether or not I'm going to do that, is that private life or not, do I have to be somewhere... I have to/am going to work anyway otherwise... I just have to make sure that it's OK for my child, and that he does something at New Year and Christmas, that that doesn't go wrong.'

It was certainly striking that in certain cases, the specific realisation of the flexibility demonstrated for the employer was made dependent on changing family situations. Bill and Walter who at the time of the interview had no children, reported a possible impact and sense of extra-role behaviour becoming stricter in relation to readiness to travel, if children were to arrive. Walter articulated this as follows: *'I think that that [Walter's international project work] would get more difficult, OK I don't have any children myself but I have a lot of friends with children, and I can well imagine that if you have to be away for a week, you'd miss the little ones. And also the fact... it's sometimes the case 'we've got a problem; you need to catch a plane tomorrow'. That means you now [without children] shouldn't arrange and plan too much socially... if there's a fire you just have to and can go...'* The indicated shrinking flexibility was nevertheless always expressed in 'a conditional sense', and thus not with certainty. Yet, in contrast to the supposed extra-role reduction expressed by Bill and Walter, Marc saw no reason whatsoever why he should have to change his international pattern should children come along. For him, travelling is permanent and since he was young *'in his blood'* (Marc). Other IBTs – with children (Nils, Cindy, Kevin and Florence) – commented that being away from home allowed them to de-stress, or put them at ease as was specifically the case with Nils: *'(...) you're at ease for once. That's just how it is. I mean, I'm reading a book, that's only if I'm on the road... If I go abroad for three days for my work, I go to eat something in the evening and then I have my book with me.'* Regularly and irregularly being away appeared amongst the IBTs involved to create an mind-set whereby their energy is rapidly channelled and could entirely be

devoted to a particular aim (private or work, at home or on a trip) – as likewise indicated in literature by Mayerhofer et al (2004) amongst others. The possibility to de-stress when being away from the family (routines) was furthermore considered as energy charging for a more focused attitude on their return or an awareness that *'home is nice'* (Cindy). This positivity proved only to come about if the necessary arrangements were made with the other family members involved. For instance, Kevin stated this several times in the conversation. The following interview passages, not selected in an exhaustive manner, demonstrate the importance of making arrangements and the necessary transparency in this regard – at least from Kevin's point of view: *'... but you have to make arrangements. We've made arrangements, me with my wife – she knows that at certain times I'll be away a lot and at certain times I'll be at home (...) It's extremely important that the partner, that my wife knows what you're doing. My wife at all times knows where I am, I do that for her, and she can also call at any time. She anyhow knows that I'm here, she won't actually call, but she can in fact at any time. Wherever I am, even if I'm asleep, she can always reach me – that's why it [the IBT work execution] is still going on...'*

The IBT extra-role behaviour actually practised was made mutually by all of the IBTs. Every IBT reported clearly to expect the employer also to treat them with a certain – which I myself interpreted as a rather major – sense of **flexibility**. As Nils stated, the flexibility must *'come from two sides'*. This relational employer obligation was specifically defined according to the IBT's personal interest. For instance, Kevin expected and received broad employer obligingness adjusted to him: *'Have a house built? (interviewer). I built it myself (laughs). (...) But then I took three months' leave and I built that house. So that can be done without flaw, and I can also sort it out.'* Andy referred to a similar, present, flexibility provision: *'... it's still also flexibility that I expect, it's like if I want a month's leave, I can also take it. That always surprises me; you don't have a lot of people who are allowed to take a month off work. I'm one of those whose employer lets them do that.'*

The employers' flexibility requirement was also presented more moderately throughout the cases – than the two examples just cited – usually with a direct/indirect reference to an expected/obligatory respect for the employee's work-life balance. The international aspect related to the IBT role with which a broad extra-role behaviour is associated appeared to be *the* motivation for assuming the space to keep work-life situations in balance – at least in my own interpretation, but derived from the interviews. A broad vision in relation to applying the general company office/labour requirements was considered as evident. This mainly involved adjusted working hours in order – if applicable – to go to the family more quickly/for longer, or to be able to perform certain family duties without any specific request. The definition and practical application that Nils gave to the term 'flexibility' (from the employer's side) clarifies this: *'... For me what flexibility is... knowing that – it sometimes happens that I'm stopping an hour earlier because of the children – that they don't get difficult about that. If you perhaps start a quarter of an hour late, that there isn't any trouble about it. Well, it's not all about taking and then just having to give, but almost every day I stop exactly on time... if I'm at the office... but [if I am home] at half nine my wife and I will be sitting together working another two hours at the computer. However, I like it that the time when the children are awake, that you see them, that they [the employer] are flexible enough about it... that they say, look if someone is sick tomorrow you can still quickly go to the doctor's, that I go a bit later because I first have to go to the doctor's, and that there's nothing said like OK, you need to have a note. We also don't have to clock with a pass, which they had to do at [other company, previous employer]. Sure, there's a certain flexibility in it. That fact that they know that if you leave at 5 a.m. and you're home at 11 [after a trip abroad] and you've said that you're just going to be half an hour late another day, that you can do that without any problem...'*

Besides the aforementioned working-hours adaptability and the space to be provided for fulfilling personal interests – such as Nils' and Sam's need for leave – the IBTs interviewed also provided further opinions on the employers' flexibility obligation. This extension was principally related to the individual (appropriated/permited) way of performing work. Since, compared with

country-based employees, IBTs work less at fixed locations and according to variable hours when they are travelling their work is inevitably performed in a heavily individualised manner. The interviewees of this study assumed being able to extend this individualised and flexible way of working to their entire job execution (also for the home-based aspect) – yet within existing, Belgian employment contracts, this is not always easy to achieve/to implement. Deploying people in a flexible way is, after all, impeded by labour legislation and employment conditions (see also the background on the Belgian labour market included under 1.3. THE BELGIAN RESEARCH CONTEXT). Even if the will exists (within the organisation) to provide employees with greater freedom and autonomy, this transpires not always to be possible; legal and organisational issues have to be arranged. In this context of flexibility to be granted by the employer, the provision for working at home regularly came under discussion during the interviews, whereas it was integrated within the companies in different ways. For example, Cindy reported it as a principle not generally applied; although, as a way of working she assigned herself to which her direct manager turns a blind eye: *‘... I think I can work at home, so I work at home. Whether I’m at the office calling China, or I’m at home, it’s the same thing, isn’t it? It’s not because you’re responsible worldwide, and you have people around you. If I have meeting, then of course I’m there. But to call around the world, or to follow the system, etc. I can do that anywhere. That’s what I think you see with government companies, I have friends in the non-profit world, and there’s a completely different mentality there. I’m afraid it’s still too early for [employer].’* For others, including Walter, working from home is already (in a limited way) the subject of company policy – consequently the application of this was viewed as more evident. However, the degree to which Walter fitted working from home into his own situation (specifically: one day a week working from home) was fairly broad/more extensive in comparison with his colleagues who only work from home sporadically. The need and justification for applying this in fact counted on the management’s understanding, although at present within Belgium there is only limited support amongst companies for a flexible form of work implementation such as this (SD Worx 2012). This somewhat illustrates the pragmatic attitude referred to in the literature study that characterises Belgian

employees (Sels et al 2000). The IBTs quoted here appeared to have succeeded in overriding collective rules, discussing these ultimately to reach a specific/compromise agreement with their superior. Additionally, the IBT experiences shared stirred also the impression (as far as I am concerned) that there was/is a special connection between the IBT and his/her direct superiors. Certain privileges focused on the person, that clearly deviated from the standard company policy, were after all granted by the superiors. Amongst other things, this impression can for example be very clearly derived from the following passage concerning Andy's interpretation of employer flexibility: *'Well my official work schedule is from 8 to 5. But it's also OK if I arrive at 9. You have so many of those stupid things that you can't do otherwise, getting tyres changed or going to the bank or things that are only open during the week, I can then do that and get to work later. And so I do expect that flexibility, that you don't have to start taking leave for it. Other flexibility is if I can take a long lunch, my hours are in fact... I don't really have a work schedule, and I think that's good. And that doesn't apply for everyone in the company, I can do it, but there are a lot of people who aren't able to do that. My boss lets me do it, and he's the boss, so I don't get involved in that so much, so for me – if I want a long lunch, I have a long lunch. While a lot of people are like: 'damn it, it's 1 o'clock and I have to start work again.'* A special bond such as illustrated above was justified by the fact that the IBT concerned showed on the one hand extensive extra-role behaviour and on the other hand a high-level in-role performance. The latter was expressed by Andy as: *'my boss knows that I work hard. He even sees it, we talk about it, what counts for us are the results and not the hours, and as long as I deliver, and that I communicate properly... then it [this personalised flexibility] is always OK.'*

A final, yet notable, employee obligation under the theme of role behaviour concerns **proactive role behaviour**. This term refers to 'the obligations that employees feel in order to enhance the operation of the organisation as a whole' (Bal et al 2010, p. 382). In the context of this research, proactive behaviour is considered as a relational responsibility and broader than in-role and extra-role behaviour. Employees who behave proactively are

demonstrating 'initiative in order to optimise current work circumstances and/or to create new ones; they challenge status-quo situations and are focused on change instead of assuming a passive working attitude' (Crant 2000, p. 436).

It transpires that proactive role behaviour only receives limited (if not no) attention in related psychological contract literature (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; De Vos, Buyens and Schalk 2003; Freese 2007; Conway and Briner 2009); nevertheless all of the IBTs interviewed in this study admitted having a drive to strive towards the '*best for the company*' (Nils and Cindy), '*Also purely towards figures*' (Nils). They considered this energy/drive as a normal and unequivocal attitude to be provided to the employer. The proactive role behaviour concerned, which stemmed from the IBTs' own initiative, was interpreted and focused on in various ways. Andy stated that he attaches a great deal of value to the '*importance of the whole group*' when difficult, above all ethical decisions have to be taken. He referred in this mind set also to having a constant obligation and willingness (imposed by himself) to make the company's results increase. Marc expressed it somewhat more vigorously by stating that he '*fights for the company*' as if he – as an unmarried man – is married to it in order to '*push it forward*'. In connection with this, he stated his desire/hope to be able to become a partner in the company at some point – as a realisation or acknowledgement of his proactive role behaviour... Florence, just like Kevin, linked the proactivity obligation with a strong sense of identification with the employer's position; she specifically reported to being minded to work for/with her employer in that way as if it were for herself: '*In fact I myself am the employer somewhat, I'm just not [legally] independent (laughter). I see myself as an employee, employer, everything...*' From this viewpoint, she to some extent admitted to going to extremes and commented figuratively '*wanting to go through the fire*' for her employer.

The proactive IBT behaviour also turned out to be partly/also associated with the aforementioned employees' extra-role or flexibility obligation whereby the boundary with working within the standard times becomes blurred. Kevin

amongst others illustrated this as follows: ‘... *I catch myself, even at home, constantly thinking about how it could be better and where there’s still potential, and things like that.*’

In this context of employee behaviour a link can be made – as a side comment – with the literature in which it is stated that companies wishing to have lasting success in the current dynamic and decentralised business world require a certain degree of proactive attitude from their employees (Crant 2000; Bal et al 2010; Parker, Bindl and Strauss 2010). Since the IBTs of this study reported that a proactive mind set such as this is broadly provided, this once again emphasises the crucial role of the IBTs in a company’s drive towards success (yet in a manner not to be generalised and interpreted in an entirely personal way for this research) (see also 5.2.1. *THE ROLE OF THE IBT*).

An attractive and diverse IBT job content... to be provided by the employer, although... with a hefty dash of freedom!

Besides the other psychological-contract content elements described in this section, all of the study participants reported attaching importance to the **content aspect of their job**. The general importance of the job content was amongst other things/indirectly ratified by certain participants (in particular by Nils, Cindy, Kevin and Andy) referring to the content of duties and responsibilities associated with the future role having been determining factors in their definitive job choice.

In this analysis, the contract dimension of job content is considered as relational and supported by the sub-themes of responsibility (leadership), travelling and diversity. These employer obligations are dealt with successively – the theme of freedom is also woven into these as a perceived employer obligation.

Assuming and being able to demonstrate **responsibility** or leadership constituted many of the obligations/ideas heard, if not the most distinctive and explicitly referred to requirements, at the start of the interviews. The sentence construction '*I'm responsible for...*' literally occurred several times with Nils, Cindy, Bill, Kevin as well as Sam. Amongst the interviewees, responsibility emerged as an essential job-content factor without this appearing to be written out or entirely decided in the employment relationship/the legal employment contract. The interpretation of this responsibility was usually characterised by a relational flavour – being able to '*get on with*' and '*managing ... [people/teams]*', as stated by Nils – and was dependent on/evolving with the IBT's work context. For instance, Walter's responsibility also/mainly involved a technical element, while for others – such as Florence, amongst others – it involved more a coordinating and even leading responsibility. The way that the interpretation of the theme responsibility was stretched out logically turned out to correspond with the position of the company hierarchy; in relation to this, a sense of realism in terms of authority was demonstrated. In other words, the IBTs consulted knew their place within the organisation, and appeared neither to under nor over-estimate them (at least as I perceived it after having conducted some background research on the companies involved and their structure/operation). Nonetheless, the need for responsibility as a job content factor was present with each respondent.

Along with responsibility, **travelling** (or the experience associated with this) made up a noteworthy, yet at the same time also obvious, provision of the IBT psychological contract. In the IBTs' stories, a certain discrepancy could nevertheless be detected in relation to the essential nature and the importance attached to travelling.

All of them in any case found it pleasant and enriching to travel – '*you empathise with the world in this way*', as expressed by Cindy. Yet not all considered travelling as a crucial psychological-contract aspect to be provided by the employer. For instance, for Florence travelling is '*by random in the role*' and she does simply '*think that's nice*'. It was remarkable that

Florence, just like other IBTs, experiences the actual travelling – although with transport that she does not drive herself: aeroplanes and trains – as positive: *‘I really like being on aeroplanes, for eight hours or so, I think that’s great. There’s no telephone, no computer because you can’t get any network, so it’s real time for me. I can do a report and for once I can think a long time about it. (...) You can also think about your strategy, you can start thinking in an overarching way (...) how am I going to organise my team... how am I going to organise those roles... People from my team who have had certain comments... who say we should [should do] this or that some time... how am I going to deal with that, how do I try to get these people in. I can’t do that [overarching strategic thinking], if you’re busy with a hundred and one things. I really think that’s very nice, that I really have time for once... just those hours that you’re travelling – because I have to say, those hours that you’re travelling, you’re easily twelve, if you have a connection flight, sixteen hours travelling – so you have so much time to rest for once and think. It’s time that you’d otherwise never have.’* This time for reflection or ‘me time’ – as outlined by Florence and other IBTs who stated less explicitly, but nevertheless mentioned it – can be related with and has a stimulating influence on the proactive IBT role behaviour. After all, evaluating one’s own behaviour and that of others leads to valuable business insight from which, consequently, optimisation initiatives can be developed (Crant 2000). In this way, the fulfilment of the psychological-contract employer obligations (travelling) can be of sustaining influence to the perceived employee obligations (proactive role behaviour). As reported previously in this work, this positive link was also stated (and illustrated with specific examples) in the studies of DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich (2000), Westman, Etzion and Gattenio (2008) and Westman, Etzion and Chen (2009) for instance.

Some of the IBTs interviewed pointed nonetheless (but briefly) to a potential risk of disinterest/practical impediment associated with the travelling. Kevin reported finding it frustrating having to wait too often and too long (unproductively) at airports. He explicitly stated not wanting to lose any hours in security checks, and thought that his employer should provide the priority passes necessary for this, which were also available. However, if Kevin has

not travelled for some time, he commented then to find waiting not all that bad and even *'great'*... The positivity therefore usually (or rather always) continued to have the upper hand, even if negative/less positive (and any potential) comments concerning travelling were made. Only one IBT, Cindy, referred to the packing/unpacking and the washing activities associated with travelling as a burden: *'... I really like travelling, but if it gets too much, it's just a hassle.'* With long trips, Bill referred to the employer's responsibility and the support or financial compensation to be provided for performing domestic matters such as this (although letting it perform on location).

Both female IBTs (peripherally) brought up that travelling is (in the general business world) found to be a rather atypical role for women despite the fact that according to the literature investigation cited above, female representation can be increasingly noted within the international business landscape (Adler 2002; Altman and Shortland 2008). Cindy in particular cited having to struggle against a classic pattern of roles when doing business with contacts from other cultures [in which mothers stay with their children to constantly look after them]. This is illustrated by the following interview passages: *'For me, it's rather atypical being a woman travelling. For instance the feedback – in Belgium that's OK, but if you go to somewhere like Slovakia, or more to the East or China: 'how can you leave your children behind for a week?' It's talked about a great deal psychologically, yes, that's a major difference. (...) I don't have any problem with it. Certainly because they [Cindy's children] are still so small. In the majority of countries women stay at home a year up to three years; so yes that fact that we have fifteen weeks here is pretty outrageous, and that's what they talk to you about. I then say, I also went to the crèche and it didn't do me any harm, so it can't be that bad. It's a different mentality, while men, even if they have seven children so to speak, no-one there is going to think about him being away for a week and leaving his seven children, that's normal.'* Kevin confirmed this classic man/women role pattern, cited by Cindy and sometimes felt to be awkward, by stating during the interview that he supposed women only have limited interest in an IBT job, on account of *'being away a lot'*. He likewise added that he sees – from his own experience – an extremely limited

retention of women in IBT roles. This perception appears to conflict somewhat with the vision accepted by Tung (2004) that women are willing to undertake international assignments, and are also presumed to be successful in this respect.

The male IBTs contacted evaluated the travel aspect with significant value – with some expressing this with greater force and verbal conviction than others. The *‘drive surrounding travel’* was indicated as *‘awesome’*, the *‘experience itself’* as *‘really exciting’* and consequently, presented explicitly, obligatory within their work deal in the words of Marc and Bill. Nils noted that he couldn’t do without travelling, but immediately made it clear – with a degree of emotion – that the frequency of travel should not be increased, due to family reasons. He explained this as follows: *‘It’s always like searching for a balance between, like at a certain point you also get a feeling of guilt, that’s just how it is. You know you aren’t leaving your wife and three children behind, but I mean dumping all of the week’s worries on her, and that’s just how it is...’* The fact that Nils made such a side note was possibly caused – although not expressed so – by the fact that he lost his father at a relatively young age (*‘ruptured artery, but everyone knows it was stress from work’*). A personal incidence such as this might imply living life with somewhat different values (than the other IBTs interviewed here whereby above all the men fully experienced and enjoyed the travel aspect).

Diversity was named as the third sub-theme of job content (in addition to responsibility (leadership) and travelling) and as an eighth psychological contract obligation within this analysis. I (personally) felt that the concept did not occur as strikingly as the two other sub-theme obligations discussed above. However, the concept of diversity received specific attention amongst certain respondents. Given the multifaceted role of the IBT already described above (see 5.2.1. THE ROLE OF THE IBT), diversity also/already formed a common thread throughout the IBTs’ psychological contract narratives. Cindy for example associated diversity with expanding job content, and illustrated this as follows: *‘But I’m thus also getting other things. I was recently given packaging, so every time new things come along. I think that’s nice’*.

Throughout the interview, the stated 'nice' feature was signalled as an employer obligation. Kevin saw diversity as 'renewal', '(...) continually introducing new things, discovering new things (...) ' which he then – together with travelling – indicated as two extremely important employer obligations at a certain point in the interview. In contrast, Sam approached the diversity obligation from a broader, company-related viewpoint, without thus interpreting it as less crucial: '(...) if the company grows and wants to do and keep on doing new things, then that's OK for me. (...) they really have to try continually giving you new challenges and satisfaction and so I have that right now. If that stops, I might perhaps have to change companies, but for the time being I can still do new things, find new challenges.'

From a wholly personal/my own angle, with the job-content theme I saw a certain link with the career aspiration 'getting high (internationally)' cited in the work of Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) as a principle motivation for the jobs of international frequent flyers (see also [table 4](#)). This designation of 'getting high (internationally)' principally refers to the job-tasks to be performed that must be interesting and new, and preferably have to be strategic and certainly steeped in an internationally exceptional nature (Demel and Mayrhofer 2010). According to Demel and Mayrhofer (2010), the presence of the aforementioned factors in the role execution implies a kind of happiness and sensation of excitement strived for amongst the executors. Without being able to assign the felt link in an extremely explicit manner (after all, the study by Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) is also qualitative in nature), on a further review of the literature similarities can be detected with the job-content sub-themes of responsibility, travelling and diversity illustrated above. It is also apparent in the psychological contract research of De Vos and Meganck (2009) that Belgian employees attach a degree of value to the job-content aspect without that nevertheless being prioritised. It proves furthermore that the job-content dimension used by De Vos and Meganck (2009) leans heavily on the responsibility obligation identified in this study (De Vos, Buyens and Schalk 2003). The travel and diversity aspect (as sub-themes of the job-content obligation in this work) remain rather undiscussed; however, neither is there any inquiry or study/sample-focus in this regard in the Belgian

studies referenced (De Vos, Buyens and Schalk 2003; De Vos and Meganck 2009).

Another very considerable IBT psychological contract element, which was directly related with job content and execution, involved **freedom**. The freedom that the employer is relationally obliged to permit was expressed in the manner of content-related, but also practical, job execution. The IBTs cited the freedom to determine themselves their agendas as a tacit employer provision interpreted as standard. In this context, Bill referred – with satisfaction – almost *‘being his own boss’* and being able to work in *‘fairly loose’* association, *‘without too much control’*. Other IBTs interviewed approached the concept of freedom more explicitly and with greater force. Florence exemplified this like so: *‘No-one can tell me when I have to do something. That wouldn’t work. So freedom is the most important thing for me.’* Nils reported a more moderated interpretation of freedom which his employer, understandably for Nils, could see as linked to the correct accomplishment of targets: *‘... you do your own thing and if the results are good, no-one can complain about it.’* Based on an example situation, Walter outlined the importance attached to his free (yet responsible) actions – his response to a comment from a colleague when this was applied was fairly robust: *‘I turned around 180 degrees and went back home. I didn’t need to know that (...) You do for good and it’s no one else’s business, only your boss of course.’*

It can be derived from the interviews that it is being able to manage job execution independently that makes the work itself interesting for the IBTs. In addition, it appeared to give them the possibility to balance out their job execution with their private life, and to adjust it to their evolving professional interests. After all, almost all of the IBTs expressly reported wanting jointly to determine their career progression within the company – in a constructive manner, together with the employer. The employer proactively offering the freedom to steer their professional trajectory emerged as being important. Bill described this figuratively as deciding for oneself *‘to jump onto the train of opportunities’* which is ran by the employer.

Some of the respondents nonetheless testified that it is the responsibility of the employee/IBTs to take initiatives themselves, should they find themselves within job frameworks that are too restricted and not free enough. Hence also the placement aligned to the right of the obligation within tables 9 and 10. This particular employee initiative was interpreted more broadly by certain IBTs then merely bringing up and addressing the urge for freedom. Sam and Andy cited opportunities they themselves introduced to take course – approved by the employer – as specific examples of their own, expected action. In the abovementioned IBTs' vision, taking courses would imply a broadened level of competence, which would subsequently induce the employer to be able confidently to give greater freedom for an intended broadened job execution.

The IBT: a committed human resource... although only within an inspiring work environment with development opportunities

The term 'commitment' used in the title and below refers to the IBTs' 'affective commitment' or to their 'emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation' (Allen and Meyer 1990, p. 2). The IBT affective commitment was understood as positive and substantial (throughout the cases) – as also already explained above numerous times. The IBT affective commitment translates itself especially in this study into a loyal attitude, perceived as obligatory, with regard to the employer. With this study, loyalty was coded as a separate and strong theme advancing towards the foreground. The obligation was mainly dealt with from the viewpoint of the IBT and less reciprocally, hence the placement of the term on the employee side in table 9 and 10).

In what follows, the IBTs' loyalty is explained in a more focused manner, and light is shed on the indissoluble link with the themes (employer obligations) development and work environment or social atmosphere.

The **loyal** and the thus in itself committed attitude that was identified in all of the IBTs' stories was striking. Nils, Bill, Kevin, Sam, Marc and Walter reported firmly that it is highly likely that they will remain with their current employer for the next three years. This indication can and must be interpreted with a degree of subjectivity; however, it was always stated by the IBTs concerned that the reported plan of retention entailed a genuine trust. The three remaining interviewees answered the question on the possibility of full, 100 per cent employer loyalty for the next three years with some reservation – nevertheless without reporting any non-loyal behaviour. Florence expressed this as follows: *'Provided I myself don't have any exceptional circumstances why I wouldn't do it [stay with the current employer for the next 3 years], probably yes'*. The two other IBTs, Cindy and Andy, gave an *'I think so/probably yes'* comment.

Based on the aforementioned, it was obvious that the IBTs concerned offer the employer a form of security in relation to the potential term of their employment relationship. Nils phrased this powerfully as follows: *'I start in every new working partnership with the idea of 'for the rest of my life'. You never know how it's going to go, but I think that's the only way to start out...'*

From the IBT side, the long-term vision stated with conviction relating to the employer partnership entered into therefore indicates a contract nature categorisation that leans against the relational, at least based on the contract-typifying term indications noted in [*table 5*](#). It is indeed notable that the conviction of this 'long-term, open-ended promise' does not entirely tally with the Belgian research of Soens et al (2005) in which a more transitional career trend is observed amongst highly educated employees.

Notwithstanding the fact that particular IBTs stated an absolute certainty of company retention, others however nuanced this somewhat. For instance, the loyalty obligation/idea was discussed by Bill not as unconditional, but nevertheless always with strongly positive conviction: *'I don't want to bind myself 100 per cent to a company, although I want to give everything for the company. If opportunities come along, I certainly want to hear them.'*

However and independent of whether the long-term engagement of the employee was made unconditional or with some (a little) reservation, it clearly stood out that the stated IBT loyalty vision in essence related to the employer-employee connection. Job loyalty turned out not to have been given by any IBT whatsoever, in contrary to company/employer loyalty found. Role stability or (put pejoratively) position entrenchment were not what interested them. All of the respondents stated that they believed it very important to be occupied with something that kept their professional motivation vibrant. Continually answering their broadly formulated and evolving interests and being able constantly to learn were often cited. Cindy literally stated she would find it '*horrible*' having to do the same thing '*for the rest of your days*', and hereby referred to the – in her opinion – non-varying and non-evolving role of a dentist. In that regard and considered throughout the cases, **development** (here categorised as a separate theme) constituted a crucial obligation that is part of the IBT psychological contract with the current employer.

The theme analysis revealed that development was seen as an employer obligation, characterised from three perspectives: horizontal, vertical and personal development. Entirely corresponding with the interviews' individuality – and possibly other factors not investigated here – a preference was established and expressed for a specific evolution direction. In connection with this – just as with the report/description of the job-content theme – a link can be noted with the published narratives of Austrian business travellers interviewed in the study by Demel and Mayrhofer (2010). Hierarchical advancement in particular (as also mentioned in table 4, but designated as vertical career development in this study) and personal development were associated as important motives and aims regarding with short-term international employment.

All of the IBTs in this study perceived – just as the Austrian study target group referred to above of Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) – the obligatory provision of opportunities for **vertical career development** or, in other words, offering career opportunities as indispensable. The transactionally

tinted concept of career opportunities was construed according to the IBT's position (and work environment). For instance, Nils stated very specifically and clearly wanting to end up *'higher in the hierarchy'*. Vertical development provision such as this for getting *'a step higher'* (as expressed by Nils) must nevertheless be evaluated with certain caution, and a broader interpretation than merely a climb up the hierarchical ladder is required. After all, the vast majority of the IBTs interviewed belong proverbially to the management elite of the company, whereby a promotion jump is not possible just like that. A potential vertical hierarchy step is therefore/usually characterised in practice by a long-term approach, or can only occur in exceptional circumstances. Kevin outlined this as follows: *'I grew up in IT, so there are only two possibilities for me to progress. That is: IT vice-president or CIO, so there are no more than two steps within [employer] and then I'm at the top...'* Nonetheless, all of the IBTs cited the prospect on – as they interpreted it – career development and the security of having these prospects as essential. Florence associated her career opportunities with starting up new projects (to be developed); Andy saw his major career opportunity in the proposed start-up and expansion of a new entity. Both IBTs were less concerned about whether their current/future opportunities would effectively imply a theoretical higher rank. It was primarily that they themselves have the feeling of being able to make a career jump.

Despite the limited theoretical room for role growth in certain cases, the IBTs reported only little interest in vertical external career development, which also sounds logical given the loyalty commitment entered into. It proved to be of the utmost importance to the IBTs to have prospects of future internal career opportunities that – in accordance with that already stated above – they themselves want, but sometimes also have to help along. The IBTs questioned also wished to assume a responsibility in this context. Just as the freedom obligation, the theme is therefore aligned to the right within tables 9 and 10. From the viewpoint of the interviewees the employer has to offer the IBT growth opportunities; however, these must not be served up ready to eat. According to the interviewees, it is subsequently down to the IBT to start something with these opportunities, to take initiatives. Kevin articulated this

as: *'if you want to achieve something at [employer], you have to work for it yourself, you have to propose it yourself, you have to do it yourself.'* It was furthermore indicated that the IBT must also transparently indicate his/her career needs for this purpose; as Sam stated: *'If you don't say anything yourself, you won't get anything. You have to continually share your thoughts.'* The fact of working or having worked internationally was not once mentioned by the IBTs as a licence for further easy career growth.

Cindy commented briefly in the context of vertical career progression – although she was the only one of the interviewees to do so – on having the sensation that her male colleagues are more geared toward and focused on promotion than female IBTs. She reported this as an essential perceived difference, besides a possible different/more intense importance attached to the travel factor, in male/female IBT role execution. In other IBT narratives there was no confirmation, nor contradiction, nor any indication concerning the differing value of promotion found in the psychological contract.

Some of the IBTs, although not all, considered the internal possibility of **horizontal role shifting** or '*rotation*' (as Cindy called this) as a must to be provided by the employer. In particular, the IBTs working for the larger companies (see [table 7](#)) discussed this as an entirely normal rather relational employer provision, which should be provided without any problem. In connection to this, by way of illustration reference was made by for example Nils to intranet sites where new vacancies are opened every day for, in the first instance, internal employees. In connection with this, Kevin talked about an '*open-vacancy network*' or '*an internal job database*' that promotes job-switch opportunities (not necessarily higher in hierarchy).

The third aspect within the theme of development refers to **personal development** as a more relationally tinted obligation (based on the nature indication suggested and noted in [table 10](#)). The IBT interviewees of this study turned out not only to be constantly moving physically (in terms of working location) – they also reported striving for personal, internal movement and growth within their role execution. Personal growth such as

this was perceived fairly broadly by certain IBTs as a necessary – adrenaline tinted – rollercoaster of successive experiences. Bill, for instance, outlined this as follows: ‘... *I want to gain different experiences in my life. I want, when I’m old to say it that way, to be able to look back onto different experiences, purely in terms of experience, I want to have tried out different things.*’ Sam added in the same line of thought that he considered international experience ‘*as enriching*’. According to him, such enrichment would irrefutably contribute towards personal growth. Other IBTs, at random referring to Marc and Nils, defined personal growth by pointing – not exhaustively – to learning or being able to use additional languages (apart from their native tongue).

The loyal IBT behavioural attitude was – usually and along with the required prospect of development – also linked with the need to be able to work in an inspiring work environment. The **social atmosphere** associated with this was – at first sight – coded as overall an employer obligation. It nevertheless became clear in the coding process that the owner of the psychological-contract obligation in question was viewed more broadly than merely the employer, in other words it sometimes turned out (yet not always explicitly commented) that (again) a role is/was set aside for the IBT for the effective fulfilment of the obligation. In this study, social atmosphere was therefore analysed from a twofold point of view (hence the column-overlapping positioning of the term in [table 9](#) and [10](#)). Social atmosphere was furthermore approached and assessed differently depending on the IBT. Independently of the individual interpretation and requirements concerning the IBT’s work environment, three aspects emerged as extremely typical. The desire for firstly a familial and secondly a collegial working atmosphere was expressly stated; respect and trust were also indicated as required components for collaboration.

Despite the international nature and the volatility that characterises the IBT’s work execution, it turned out that importance was nevertheless attached to a **familial** and extremely personal-feeling work environment. This requirement was on the one hand found with the IBTs employed in a family company or at least a company in which family members of the founders/CEOs are

employed with whom there is a connection (in the case of Bill, Sam, Florence, Marc, Andy and Walter). Sam expressed the family nature as a '*no-nonsense*' approach whereby you don't feel '*like a number*' and everything doesn't always '*officially*' has to go through a standard procedure. He additionally stated not being able to operate in any other environment. On the other hand, the importance of a convivial work environment was also highlighted amongst the IBTs who are employed in companies where the founding family no longer has any visible policy impact. With the exception of Kevin, the family aspect was yet less explicitly discussed (but present). As a unique case within a non-family multinational, Kevin saw his colleagues – with whom he enjoys working – as family: '*You could describe it [working with colleagues] as a family. It also feels like, everywhere you go you're always welcome, there's very little conflict, it really feels like a family*'. Kevin considered the family feeling as a required facilitator and an atmosphere element that has to be provided by the employer for work to be performed properly. He furthermore peripherally commented that this idea of family is in operation at his company, and hereby specifically referred to a company slogan: '*We are there for each other*'. According to Kevin, this posited HR marketing initiative laid the foundation for the realisation of a family atmosphere. Nonetheless, he made it extremely clear that each employee also plays a role in the further elaboration and retention of the family vibe – the foundation for which, he believes, is laid by the employer.

Aside from whether or not importance was attached to a familial atmosphere, the requirement for working in a **collegial atmosphere** occurred very explicitly throughout the cases. For certain IBTs, having colleagues and associating well with them even proved to be a key element for personally feeling good in their position. Sam reported to need people around him who keep on '*stimulating and triggering*' him. Nils even found it essential to see his future colleagues before accepting this current job. Walter extrapolated the required collegial atmosphere to the relationship with his manager. He also pointed out to his superior that he should start directing the collegiality existing between them more broadly to other colleagues too, in order to optimise the general working atmosphere. The following interview passage

illustrates the report/the recommendation to extend their private collegiality defined as *'special'*: *'I also have my weakness, I smoke. And he [my superior] also smokes. However we usually get all the emails together and it's usually also the case that not everyone should hear that. And he says come on, and we go for a smoke. But I don't like that, because the others also see that. And I sometimes think that they're saying look, 'they're outside again, and it's something we shouldn't hear again'. I once told [name of superior] that he shouldn't call me away so much, and that now and then he should say something to me that the others can hear too. But not just separately or just to me, I'd also be talking about it if I saw that from someone else... and get the feeling of what is it always with those two.'* However, in contrast to Walter, not all of the IBTs saw the required collegial atmosphere as fully transposed to themselves and their supervisors. Certain IBTs indicated that the collegial atmosphere, above all between their hierarchical superior and themselves, should be given certain boundaries. Retaining a degree of distance and respect for private situations was in this regard seen as a requirement so that the collegial is still experienced as professional and stimulating. Florence expressed this as follows: *'So we'll never go to each other's homes, never go out with each other after hours... sure, if we have a supplier at the weekend, but that's to link work with pleasure a bit, and it's by agreement, definitely. We never go and organise things in the weekend. (...) we're all hugely protective of our private lives'*. In connection with this, Andy also added not to have any *'personal connection'* with his direct superior: *'(...) I don't know what he does at the weekend, I don't know what his children are called (...)'*. He simultaneously and in all transparency stated to have sought this previously; however, this turned out impossible and he was now satisfied with this strict professional collegiality, without any problem.

Together with the subjective sensation of a familial and collegial work atmosphere, amongst the IBTs interviewed mutual **respect and trust** constituted core values for being able to operate professionally. These values were linked to both the relationship between colleagues and with the connection with their employer or manager (if there is already a distinction between them). The IBTs in this study gave a resolute impression that in

order to achieve respect and trust, input is required from everyone, both the employer (and/or manager) and the employee.

Cindy considered mutual respect as a basic ingredient for any '*constructive*' relationship between parties (external/internal). Bill described his own provision of respect towards his trusted project team in sports terms: '*I'm always going to serve and defend the colours of the team I play in/work for*'. Bill's employer, in his perception 'the company', also appears to have assumed 'respect' as one of its communicated and – usually practised – company core values. Andy was more or less on the same wavelength as Bill, and stated: '*to defend the company externally if [bad] things are being said, being positive about the employer (...) not sitting there moaning about all of the shit going wrong internally, because sometimes it's just utter chaos*'. Andy saw respect from the other/employer's direction in the fact that, amongst other things, there should be respect for leave situations whereby direct managers (in his case, the company CEO) accommodate emergencies.

In the same breath as respect, the term trust was throughout the cases related with the fact that the IBTs have to be trusted by their employer not to 'abuse' the employer flexibility offered. Andy also related this trust to, amongst other things, gaining trust in order to carry out an important job aspect: '*the trust in you that you can do something well. Let's say the mandate you receive from your employer to go and do that [an acquisition]*'. Walter was on the same wavelength as Andy, and also reported requiring trust and having gained this from his supervisor: '*he lets me take decisions*'. The other way around, the IBTs believed it normal and conducive to work that they trust their employer to provide the employer obligations promised. Proactivity (from both the employer as the employee) was also mentioned and assumed in relation to this. Nils, amongst others, commented for instance that he finds it '*very important*' and motivating that you '*must not ask*' for the fulfilment of provisions (whether or not to be adapted). Florence interpreted trust even more broadly and with greater, extremely explicit value – compared with the other IBTs interviewed. She saw this as expressly

mutual, inextricable together with and actually as a basic requirement for freedom. Florence stated that trust to be provided *'on two sides'* offered her the possibility – always with responsibility – to adjust her job realisation according to what is best for her and at the same time the company. In this way, for Florence (yet just like other IBTs) trust formed/forms a necessary raw material for the employee obligations stated in this study within the psychological contract, and in particular the IBT proactive role behaviour too.

The ambiguity (?) concerning IBT financial rewards

The financial aspect corresponding with employment came under discussion in every IBT interview. The subject was always brought up without explicitly inquiring into the value attached to the financial aspects within the IBTs' employment (see interview script, appendix 7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE). Financial remuneration thus turned out to be a vivid and present theme/aspect in the IBTs' professional environment and psychological contract. The importance of financial rewards was nevertheless approached by the IBTs interviewed with differing opinions.

For certain IBTs, the financial aspect constituted a dominant and explicitly stated psychological contract element to be provided by the employer. Kevin described his assessment of its importance as follows: *'Er, extremely important. I'll come out with it, I think regarding the role you perform, that you should get for it what is required. Also regarding the travelling, all that working, the number of hours that you do. We don't get an hourly wage, we don't have hours, I think they [the employer] then have to pay enough.'* Just like Kevin, Sam, Marc and Walter reported the major importance and share of the financial aspect within their current psychological contract. Walter expressed his point of view by stating: *'I **have to** [emphasised] get paid well.'* Marc expressed the financial employer obligation differently; yet with the same valuation of importance: *'(...) it goes without saying, you're your own company, so you also have to keep your own company healthy, you have to make your company make more profit, let's put it that way. Everyone is their*

own company in itself, so you also always have to try to get as much out of it as possible, don't you? We're not charities, so to speak.' Bill's story somewhat appeared to contain contradictions: on the one hand remuneration was not primary – *'not a driver'*, as he said. On the other hand financial rewards constituted both a main topic of discussion as well as a source of dissatisfaction (see discussion under point 5.2.3. THE STATE OF THE IBT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT). Remuneration was also a motivator cited for a hypothetical change of job. In that sense, the importance concerning remuneration was nevertheless, in my own subjective opinion, confirmed – albeit indirectly.

This salary-focused orientation corresponds with the psychological contract findings on Belgian employees by Sels et al (2000). However it was not noted that the IBTs who expressed feeling very strongly about this financial reward only or in the first instance *'work for the money'* (as stated by Sels et al (2000, p. 59)). The financial employer obligation never arose in the IBT narratives as *the only* aspect to be provided – although the aforementioned IBTs stated it as an essential contract element to be supplied by the employer. It was furthermore always possible to detect a reference to a broad fairness principle in the exchange of ideas of the aforementioned IBTs. Without any discussion, it was explained that *'salary according to your performance (Sam)'* must/can be made dependent: *'You can't expect to have a high salary and that your performance keeps going down. But if your performance increases, your salary should increase with it.'* It could nevertheless be sensed indirectly (by myself as researcher) that the financially focused IBTs interpreted their performance and related internationality as *'different'* from those of colleagues working locally – this unspoken being *'different'* thus, according to those involved, turned out to imply a special financial treatment. It was stated with various examples that it can by no means be considered logical that as an IBT, less should be earned than for equivalent work at a fixed national location. For instance, in this context Bill provided the following specific concern: *'It can't be that you're abroad for two weeks and that you have the feeling that, if I'd been in Belgium for two weeks I in the end would have earned the same or more.'*

Despite the importance shared and illustrated here concerning the transactional financial contract obligation, this viewpoint can in no sense be assigned to all IBTs taking part in this study. Cindy, Florence and Andy, turned out to have a differing view of the remuneration aspect. With Nils, the theme was less discussed during the interview. He reported satisfaction regarding his wage package, and indicated having a company car at his disposal as an essential wage-package element, given the absolute need for it for efficient international travel: *'If I drive to Germany in three or four days I do between 2000 to 3000 km, if I drive for six hours, then I'm calling for five hours, I have to, I want to have a good mobile, and I want, I have to have a seat where I can sit comfortably, so I'm not crippled when I get out.'*

The two female IBT study participants assessed – in a related fashion – the monetary employer provision as *'not decisive'* (Florence). The passage below stated by Cindy illustrates this vision: *'That [the financial aspect] is important, but for me that isn't, how should I say, the main goal. If I really wasn't earning anything, then I would be like: that's not right. But it's not the case that I, for instance, would go to my HR manager every half year and say hey, what's going on here (...). For me, what's very important is the job content, more than the actual financial aspect.'* In this context, Florence added with a degree of neutrality that: *'the financial aspect gives me freedom also to do what I want with my life'* – which was deemed extremely important; however, if Florence *'primarily did it [her work] for the financial aspect'*, she ironically reported she would immediately have to stop.

Andy ventures further down the line of thought of the financial aspect being assessed as less explicitly important. He interpreted the term 'remuneration' – usually approached in a purely financial manner – in a different, notable, broad way: *'I certainly want to get paid for what I do, and I want the right recognition for what I do, a fair remuneration. However, I consider remuneration from my employer as financial and non-financial. Financial, being your salary and everything that goes with this. And then the non-financial, more the appreciation you get from the people, seeing that you can help certain people, that he achieve things, that you have an impact on the*

organisation.' Andy nonetheless commented from an extremely realistic angle that according to him, a diminished importance of remuneration only comes when *'you are at a certain [hierarchical/financial] level'* which could serve as a potential explanation for his and the females' differing viewpoints concerning the salary aspect. Referring to the work of Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) and Atkinson (2007b), the/their idea could be followed that for Andy and thus also amongst the female IBTs, the obligatory provision of financial rewards acts as a kind of 'hygiene factor'. Once an obligation such as this has been fulfilled, it loses its advanced importance and attention is focused – as also in this case – on less and other work-motivating obligations (Atkinson 2007b). It is furthermore noteworthy as well that Andy, in contrast with Bill for instance and the other male IBTs mentioned above, approached the link between the travel aspect and the specific financial treatment of this in a different manner. The following interview passage clarifies this: *'You get an expenses allowance if you go abroad. So that means, you submit all the costs you incur there, plus another fixed-rate sum, but I have to say that over the last year I stopped claiming that fixed-rate amount. Maybe that's not so clever (laughter), but there's just been a discussion about 'is that necessary, should that fixed-rate sum exist?' And I was really saying: no it's not necessary, since you're going abroad and all of your costs are covered. So then you don't have to get anything extra because you're abroad, that's only going to incentivise people to leave even sooner and come back later. So it involves xx euros a day fixed rate, so it's not like I've lost thousands of euros. But I did that at the start and then after some time, when there had been that discussion, I'd assumed my own position of: 'no that's not necessary'.*' It once again appeared that the hygiene factor cited above may be the/an explanation for occupying this position, since previously in the interview Andy stated: *'And then [at the performance review] they gave me much more [salary increase] than I expected.'*

In a certain sense, the ambiguity brought to light concerning the financial aspect also indicates diversity according to psychological contract nature – without being able/wanting to state resolutely that the IBTs with considerable interest in the monetary aspect would have a purely transactional contract,

and the others would belong within the relational category. Nevertheless, the contradictions encountered relating to salary impact on the contract nature vision. An example of transactional and relational extremes with regard to contract nature categorisation can be found by contrasting the shared opinions of Marc and Nils (both nonetheless Sales Managers with an almost identical percentage of their time abroad). The following quote summarises well Marc's transactional vision: *'Absolutely, yes (...) it's obviously above all an economic relationship, so you do something and you get something back in return, it's an interaction. I don't know many jobs, except maybe things to do with Oxfam, NPOs abroad, that aren't economic interactions. No-one's going to start working for some business person out of charity, so to speak.'* Nils, for who the finance-aspect did not form a main point of discussion, referred from a completely different, rather relational perspective to his type of partnership: *'That [social relationship with the employer] is actually an extremely important aspect of my life, if I don't feel right in my job, then yes... for me it certainly isn't just economic, that's of course part of it. You wanting to progress should also be part of it, and they also know that. (...) The social aspect is definitely important and I'm someone who has to be in a good group. Feeling recognition, not just financially but also getting the feeling of what I do being appreciated and being taken into account and yeah, being able to decide...'*

Meeting of minds as the basis for a solid collaboration

With the thematic analysis the theme **open relationship** turned out to have taken shape and to have interwoven itself in the respondents' stories in a notable, ever-recurring way. This openness was stated as both an employer and an employee obligation. Florence expressed the mutual openness extensively and in an uncompromising fashion as follows: *'They [the employer] know me, they know how I think, they're in so many meetings with me (...) a very open relationship, that's very important for me, being able to have an open discussion. I'm going to tell you, of course always with respect for positions... but being able to throw something open and throw it onto the*

table and make it discussable... for me that should also be possible. I can't stand having to hide things, or that I can't say things for some reason or another, if there's something I should be able to say it. Straightforward and very open. I'm extremely direct, even towards my employer, otherwise I can't perform this role. That's always with respect. For me, that's also very important.' Walter was somewhat on the same level as Florence in relation to the openness obligation. He considered it a good and person-related character quality that proved advantageous in his work environment: *'Sure, I say everything [even to my boss]. You shouldn't be stifled. I say it how it is, that's the best thing. I never have to remember... if you don't lie or if you say your thoughts, you never have to recall who you said what to'.* In addition, his (Walter's) relationship with the company owner was also characterised by a necessarily present and mutual openness: *'I also know his [the company owner's son] way of thinking somewhat. And he knows too... I never just go into his office, not even for a raise, I've not asked for any yet. And if I go in it's that I have a substantial point to make and then he also knows 'I just have to listen, five minutes'... that's just so I can let off some steam.'*

Some IBT respondents linked openness, as an interpreted relational contract dimension, to their expected possibility of participation/having a say in company matters too. This call for participation was not treated as a separate obligation for this analysis, but subsumed under the denominator 'open relationship'.²⁹ For Nils, being able to give and being asked for an opinion concerning certain business projects constituted an important aspect to be provided within his current psychological contract. Nils amongst other things wished to be able to voice his opinion concerning any decisions imposed or potentially to be imposed in order to accept what is decided: *'Look, if they come to me and say (...) then I enter into a really polite and normal*

²⁹ A concise listing of which sub-themes were catalogued under the key concept of open relationship can be found in the appendix 7.6. LIST OF SUB-THEMES AND THEMES.

discussion with them, on why I think that isn't the case and if they can persuade me with good arguments that they're right, then I'll very gladly go (...).' Sam approached voicing opinion such as this from a somewhat more extreme attitude: 'I can say for example to [his direct superior] 'I can't see you today'. You understand, things like that... It's more than just staying to the point and discussing bids and prices, it's more general. I also always say my opinion, since bosses are usually quite uncertain, aren't they. They're very certain toward staff, but sometimes they're very uncertain. That's for sure.' Bill likewise reported the desired/needed open opportunity of being able to 'bring up "things" with his coordinating company's CEO – the person with whom he is not normally in direct contact. Steeped in a certain sense of reality, Bill commented that the actual act of participation does not always entail an immediate/direct execution: *'I have the feeling that they [employer management] are open to it [participation of employees] and, whether anything happens about it in the short term or medium term, that's a different thing. But the feeling, in itself you have the feeling that they're listening and that already gives you something.'*

With other IBTs, such a as Cindy for instance, the aspect of openness was found in the specific requirement and demand for being able to receive feedback concerning their performance. This requirement was nevertheless embedded in a spirit of optimising their own work. Nils joined Cindy in this, and expressed this as follows: *'If you don't get any signals that you're doing badly, then you have to assume that you're doing well (...); you can always do better and I'm also open to that. But if they see things that could be better, I also expect my employer to tell me that.'*

In parallel to the abovementioned, for Sam 'openness' was also linked specifically and with a great deal of repetition – in order to indicate its importance – to the need for transparent information relay of management decisions and the execution of these.

Considering the cross-case analysis performed it was thus revealed that the IBTs interviewed had a requirement to work in an open partnership, to be on

a comprehensible wavelength with their employer and to be involved in the company policy (in the broadest sense of the word). The IBTs questioned wanted their opinion/person to count in the organisation, but at the same time were prepared to adjust and/or optimise their opinion/operation (as exemplified above with the visions of Cindy and Nils). Their psychological contract this way appeared to obtain the time and opportunities in order to grow within an open working context, characterised by a transparent relationship between the parties.

5.2.3. THE STATE OF THE IBT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

In the execution of this study, the state of the IBT psychological contract was used as a separate, extremely logical ‘super-ordinate’ theme for codifying data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, p. 96). The outlook of this study does not permit any unambiguous or generalised pronouncement concerning the state of the IBT psychological contract; nevertheless, interesting findings are disclosed.

The IBTs questioned generally appeared to interpret their psychological contract satisfactory – genuine positivity concerning the IBT psychological contract state formed the leitmotif throughout the stories shared. The thought put into words by Nils ‘*At present I’m actually very happy in my job*’ was exposed several times (although worded differently); Andy for instance conveyed this idea by stating ‘*I’m perfectly content*’. The positivity encountered emerges somehow to be in contrast with the breach occurrence or familiarity expected and pointed out from the reference material discussed earlier in this work (see 3.3. THE STATE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT).

Specifically but discussed from a general perspective, seven of the nine IBTs (Nils, Cindy, Kevin, Sam, Florence, Andy and Walter) stated with conviction that they consider their current psychological contract as strongly fulfilled – which implies a clearly positive contract state. When questioned in further detail on the fulfilment of contract obligations, Andy even shared some

indication of over-fulfilment of the financial employer obligations (as already quoted above). Andy's enthusiasm was noteworthy/somewhat unusual, given that in the study of De Vos and Meganck (2009) it was precisely financial rewards that emerged as the least fulfilled contract dimension on part of Belgian employees. The remaining two respondents, namely Bill and Marc, indicated – from an overall contract evaluation vision – a fulfilled contract. This expressed itself in a less firmly pronounced contract satisfaction, at least in view of the abovementioned IBTs; however, satisfaction and thus positivity concerning the contract state was noted.

It was furthermore striking that no fully breached psychological contracts were reported by the IBTs participating in this study. The IBTs who expressed having a strongly fulfilled contract, with the exception of Walter, stopped the – my – gauging of any violated obligations with absolute negation. In contrast Bill, thus together with Walter, did indeed declare having wrestled with a breached contract obligation, without this being translated into an entire contract breach. Their experiences were categorised throughout the analysis as 'minor breach' experiences (see appendix 7.6. LIST OF SUB-THEMES AND THEMES). Sam referred to a similar sensation of discord in relation to his work situation that occurred in the past, although with this current employer. Marc discussed a financial arrangement (concerning commission schemes) that was at present only partially fulfilled, yet explicitly decided between the parties. Given that this concerns a written condition included in the employment contract, the non-fulfilment of this is not considered a psychological contract breach experience for this analysis. However, it can be noted as an aside that Marc stated that the issue concerned would/will be resolved if *'we are both sensible.'*

The incidents of Bill, Walter and Sam indicated as 'minor breach' are consecutively provided with a degree of context and explanation below.

For Bill, there proved to be one aspect in particular from the psychological contract under pressure, and that were the **company politics and application concerning remuneration and rewards for the international**

business travel. The dissatisfaction in question regularly surfaced in the interview, and can for example be found in the following passage: *‘I personally believe that [employer] should have a policy – something like look: you’re working for us on Sunday, whether it’s travelling or actually working... However contrary to this [Bill’s conviction] a distinction is now made between travel, travel time and real working. I personally think that’s absurd, if I get onto a plane and my aim is to go and to start working, technically I’m maybe not working, but I’m certainly occupied with my work. That’s my opinion... but... ‘the people’ aren’t always followed [by the employer]... yes, ‘the people’ who don’t have to do it – how they sometimes think... (...)’* Bill interpreted the lack of this remuneration element as a restricted/non-respectful attitude on the part of his employer that sits in stark contrast with what he ‘gives’ to/for the company. Although respect is included as one of the core values of his current employer, in relation to this breached financial obligation for travelling, Bill remarked that his employer is *‘still just a West Flemish company (...) that wants to earn [a lot of] money (laughter). That’s said bluntly, but that’s how it is.’* The consequences of this breach were presented seriously: *‘If they [the employer] want to keep me happy in the long term, in the end they [the employer] will have to give it [the financial reward] to me, it’s either going to end or it could end.’* The correction of grammatical tense weakening in Bill’s quote is/was nevertheless interesting, and also typified his response to the breach feeling reported. On the one hand, Bill expressed that the financially related negative experience caused real ‘*frustration*’; on the other hand it was further on in the interview considered as a ‘*dormant unhappiness about one particular thing*’. In the end, it was then summarised that this ‘*dormant unhappiness*’ concerning the financial aspect was nowadays/at the time of the interview being compensated by ‘*personal experience, international context, international people, other people other cultures, seeing another way of working, personal enrichment, not financial or material, but simply intuitively, intellectually intuitive, culture, etc.*’ In essence, Bill arrived at a positive contract balance, although with a reservation immediately made. As he put it: *‘At present, for me the balance is still much more positive than it is negative. Provided this balance is more positive, OK, then I can live with it. I’ll tell you something, if it starts getting less interesting*

in terms of content and once again somewhat poorly arranged too, and perhaps a bit more stress with clients, then I don't know how it's going to progress...'

In contrast, Walter reported a sense of '*unfair treatment*' in relation to **the non-observance of a promise – made outside the employment contract – to provide a company car** (in the case of an internal role switch). It was not so much the lack of a company car per se that displeased Walter, but rather the principle of a non-observed promise and the lack of transparency in this regard. Walter stated that he considered himself '*an old-fashioned kind of person*' for whom '*a promise is a promise*'. Despite this expressed feeling of unfairness, he evaluated the partnership with his current employer as very positive and with satisfactorily fulfilled obligations. The issue, the minor breach experienced, was therefore approached from a dual angle during the interview and soon marginalised later in Walters' discourse. Especially when the consequences of the current economic crisis on production companies (such as his own employer) were subject under discussion, the breach experience reported previously was labelled (with a laugh) as not being right. At a certain point, Walter expressed – somewhat under his breath and between the lines of his story – to be '*waffling*' ... thereby stating the ridiculousness of what had been said before. However, when Walter compared the price of a car with the company's turnover, he again questioned the employer's rigid behaviour. Still, by no means did he consider the relationship with his employer not to be good – on the contrary.

Although Sam did not report having had any breach experience, he nevertheless referred in the past to once having been at the point of severing his relationship with this current employer, since **the continually promised change in management never arrived**. The absence of change gave Sam a sense of '*frustration*' and led to a further advanced application to another internationally operating company, which was eventually abandoned. His feeling of resentment and related action were possibly enhanced by the especially poor economic/financial state in which his company was at that time: '*since at that time we'd had loss for two years*'. The spectre of a breach

disappeared by an in-depth conversation with Sam's manager giving rise to: a real commitment for change, the effective change of management and transparency of information dissemination in this respect. Sam's temporary negative emotions were thereupon converted into a regained trust and a certain job satisfaction, whereby a number of job values important for Sam were clarified and understood. Transparency of information sharing and participation (both categorised under the theme 'open relation' see 7.6. LIST OF SUB-THEMES AND THEMES) were in this regard underscored as essential elements of Sam's psychological contract: *'There is clarity and that doesn't just apply to me, but for the entire company. They recently informed all of the employees, information sessions, PowerPoint (...) they're going to completely change the entire company internally. That wasn't the case at all before. That wasn't there before, now it's clear and I think that's really important. Clarity. And they [the employer] know that too, they now also know that I think that's important.'*

Despite the negative experiences shared by Bill, Walter and Sam not having led to a full breach experience, it was nevertheless noticed that a contract actually breached would have an irreversible effect on their employment situation. Definitive end of contract with the employer appeared to be the result of a possible imbalance between the psychological contract obligations put forward by the employee and breached by the employer. Sam stated this explicitly and previously took the first step towards this in principle, as reported above. At the time of the interview, Bill and Walter put the brakes on the evolution toward a ruptured working partnership such not only by the prevalence of fulfilled obligations, but also through there being actual 'trust' in issue resolution. Bill associated his dissatisfaction with the international growing pains of a company rapidly becoming major/global, and stated with a certain understanding that *'Rome wasn't built in a day'*. Walter had received confirmation from this direct superior – which was felt to be motivating and trusting – of having done what was necessary to resolve the issue; however, without being able to present an actual result since this exceeded his authority.

The reported irreversibility of breach and its severing impact on the work relationship turns attention to a possible, specific imbalance of power in the relationship between the IBTs interviewed and their employers in question. Without wishing to posit generalised trends, the IBTs' statements point to the presence of a particular power awareness (with the IBTs themselves) whereby in their eyes the organisation is interpreted as dependent from them/their role (whether strongly or not). Referring to the work of Larsen (2004, p. 861), the aforementioned IBTs specifically claim the 'power to sack the employer' by stating they will/would depart in the event of breach situations if there were no action from or confidence in the employer to resolve issues. Further analysis of the experiences shared also heightens the IBT breach and contract complexity: on the one hand the '*dormant*' negativity – as Bill put it – proves not to be peacefully stable, but could soon 'be brought to life' (at least according to the IBT involved); on the other hand, the power ownership – as previously stated by Sam – appears impressionable and thus not irreversibly leading to contract ending. These observations could therefore indicate a certain tolerance behaviour on the part of the IBT, without thereby excluding the danger/risk of breach consequences if 'minor' events accumulate (Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro 2011).³⁰

With the IBTs who did not report a (minor) breach experience the consequences of breach failed to form any main focus of discussion. However, it could – just like with the IBTs who reported a minor breach – indirectly be presumed that a substantial breach experience could/would imply the end of the working relationship. All IBTs mentioned anyway, but not expressly, potential deal breakers during the conversation. The aspects cited varied not only according to frequency and depth of statement with each IBT, but also according to content. With the IBTs who discussed a breach

³⁰ A potential continuity of events and the related impact were not investigated with this research. Nevertheless, the reflection done (mentioned above) certainly makes the interesting nature of extending research in that direction apparent, and is thus acknowledged (see 6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH).

experience, the subject directly and logically formed a broader subject of discussion than with others. Three themes nevertheless arose as the most significant/recurrent in this context namely: financial rewards, freedom and flexibility. For instance, Kevin saw the result of his freedom being curtailed as follows: *'I'm going to tell you, if I had a boss who's actually 'my' boss, I wouldn't work there any more...'* and further on in the interview stated: *'If I weren't paid well, I wouldn't do it [current work] anymore.'*

The themes indicated as possibly leading to breach when not fully present anymore were also/logically found with the content-related psychological contract analysis (dealt with above under 5.2.2. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE IBT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT: THE CONTRACT CONTENT AND NATURE) and characterised by a substantial, yet individual-dependent, notion of importance. Not providing employer obligations deemed to be important consequently constituted a conceivable cause of psychological contract dissatisfaction within a job/working partnership. Breach and factors or situations that might evolve into a breach were/are thus consequently determined extremely individually for each IBT, given the non-equal content-related psychological contract essence(s), discussed in the previous chapter (referred to here-above).

Besides the aforementioned content-related potential deal breakers, Florence also reported that if Belgian legislation were to allow her – without any problems – to perform the same job as a freelancer, she wouldn't want to be prevented from doing so. She also explained the advantage associated with this: *'That way I'd have even more of a sense of freedom, I'd find it even better for myself.'* Florence was nevertheless strict; she would not want to become a freelancer in order to leave her current employer or to accept additional assignments from new employers. Despite this topic being examined exhaustively during the interview with Florence, there was no potential statute-switch in sight, given the restrictions incorporated into the related Belgian legislation – which Florence appeared to know well, possibly because her husband also works on a self-employed basis.

It was most notable that the IBTs of this study reported anticipating a potential future-perceived imbalance by making the unwritten obligations of their psychological contract discussable – within the context of their ‘open relationship’ (listed as key obligation n° 18 in [table 9](#)). The initiative for preventing breaches thus/also fell under the IBT’s responsibility. The IBTs interviewed all stated – although some more explicitly than others – that tabling/bringing up perceived, not sufficiently elaborated obligations is entrenched in their working relationship. Andy reported having to ‘*substantiate*’ discussions such as these; Walter actually advised ‘*not treading on people’s toes*’ in this regard, but rather introducing something ‘*delicately*’. Florence even considered keeping some dissatisfaction to oneself in relation to the employment relationship and the tendentious consequences as ‘*betrayal*’ towards the other party (the employer). She put it resolutely: ‘*If I’m not so happy about something... I’ll go back to it; otherwise I can’t do my work (...)*’. With this assigned responsibility – expressed somewhat differently by each research participant – the IBTs indicated themselves, according to my interpretation, as contract/deal guardians and negotiators for avoiding breach experiences, and related consequences. Assuming a breach-avoiding role such as this came across to a certain extent as new (Conway and Briner 2009) and also supplementary to the IBT roles described previously, which were approached from the operationality of the company (see [5.2.1. THE ROLE OF THE IBT](#)).

5.3. CONCLUSION

This chapter described the analysis of data gathered concerning IBTs’ psychological contract interpretation (with their employer). The analysis was understood as twofold: on the one hand the participants’ stories were reported; on the other hand a non-generalised explanation was formulated on the three sub-research questions by means of thematic data analysis. The description of the IBTs’ role and their psychological contract interpretation/experience proved to be characterised by a wealth of concepts

and essentialities that follow and contradict existing literature – thus indicated where relevant.

Put in an entirely personal way, it can and should also be noted that the travellers' perspectives were shared out of a certain atmosphere of positivity (by the research participants to myself). This sensation – subjective and personal – when conducting the interviews was reinforced by the lively elements that became apparent in the analysis process, for instance particularly: the optimism associated with travelling and the favourable effects of this, the limited reporting of negatively tinted breach experiences, the deal-satisfaction and loyalty amongst the IBTs. The feeling of positivity confirmed through the data analysis and the reflection in this regard was described (through various entries) in my journal. My own reflection went so far that I made links with, amongst other things, a painting – or at least the messaged depicted on it – that was in the EASYPAY GROUP buildings where various interviews were conducted. The photograph of the painting is represented below.

Figure 3: *untitled (by Hannes D'haese)*



With the – in my opinion – positive charisma of the image/words of the graphic, I was able to make a significant link with the IBT stories, during the data-gathering and analysis process. The central positioning of the individuals (the IBTs in my interpretation) is/was striking, and expressive with this painting. The distinct presentation of the two individuals referred me to the diversity in the IBTs' narratives and the unique accents in psychological contract interpretation; I recognised the interculturality that characterises the IBT role in the blend of colours used. Furthermore, the specific, not 'regular', lifestyle was strikingly discussed in the IBTs' stories and was very explicitly emphasised amongst the female IBTs (as described in the thematic analysis). In my opinion, the use of the word 'dream' in itself and the happy shapes/faces depicted represented/represent the positive atmosphere felt when interviewing the IBTs. Certain IBTs also expressly confirmed the dream status or extreme positivity interpreted by myself. Florence expressed this concisely and vigorously as follows: *'I couldn't be happier (...)'*.

Notwithstanding the fact that this reflection and the link made can be criticised, I myself believe it essential as a researcher to be able to share my personal feelings when gathering and analysing data within an interpretive phenomenological research framework. In this way and with this information, the reader is addressed from a broad and representative point of view. After all, the interpretation of the researcher and the subjectivity or particularity associated with this influence the knowledge-creation process of the phenomenological research strategy applied for this study (as also depicted in figure 2). The study discussion, conclusion as well as the implications and recommendations – described in the following, final thesis, chapter – are consequently determined by this personal, singular, research approach.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this final thesis chapter the results, the scope and the value of the IBT psychological contract research conducted are deliberated. There is first a discussion of the most important findings – a link is hereby made between significant research results and literature. Furthermore, a number of study limitations are presented, as well as the directions for potential further research. Prior to concluding this work, thoughts are shared concerning the contribution of the research carried out.

6.1. DISCUSSION OF THE PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

The central inquiry of this study is/was: **‘How do IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contract with their employers?’**

Insight concerning this main question was acquired – from an interpretive phenomenological approach – through three specific derived sub-research questions:

- What is the role of the IBT?
- What is distinctive for the IBT’s psychological contract, in terms of content and nature?
- What is the state of the IBT’s psychological contract?

Preliminary literature research, adjusted to the sub-research questions, guided the search for the essence(s) of the IBT psychological contract. Nine Belgian IBTs made up the data source of the research; a summary of their individual employment-deal experiences is/was also provided. Notwithstanding the fact that various previous chapters of this work already contain an explanation concerning and a personal interpretation of the study outcomes – the themes found as fundamental to the IBTs’ psychological contract experience/interpretation – a number of elementary findings are hereby presented, for each sub-research question.

6.1.1. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE IBT?

The thematic analysis performed concerning the role of the IBT was structured around two main overarching themes, namely: 'the multifarious, intercultural, IBT role' and 'the IBT as a strategic resource'.

The role of the IBT was experienced as varied and also described in this way in the individual participant's stories: broadly to be interpreted intra-firm, inter-firm, project and learning (knowledge intake or distribution) roles were reported, amongst others. The spectrum of roles encountered in the literature (and explicated earlier in this work, see for example *table 2*) that can be assigned to IBTs was herewith supported (Welch and Worm 2006; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007; Beaverstock et al 2009; Meyskens et al 2009; Shaffer et al 2012). The necessity of being able to multitask within one role or through the combination of various roles was specifically illustrated by the study participants – this finding thus furthermore corresponds with one of the role objectives that Mayerhofer et al (2004) put forward in their study (a study that nevertheless concentrates on flexpatriates). In connection with this, the reference of Collings, Scullion and Morley (2007) to the specialised and unusual nature of tasks assigned to IBTs also applies to the IBTs of this study – according to my interpretation at least since this was not directly explicated, but could be derived from that what was shared. After all, independent of its broad operationality and the multitask aspect, the IBTs' role implementation is made more special and/or complex in comparison with both equivalent domestic functions and expatriate roles. The geographical workplace diversity and simultaneously working in several countries contribute to this peculiarity. Although the multi-country aspect is reported in the limited IBT-related literature in existence/found, it does not form the main subject of discussion or a determining element in the IBT function/role description (Welch and Worm 2006; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007; Demel and Mayerhofer 2010). In contrast to this, the research performed with this study indicated the need to possess specific skills, talents and interests in order to be able to operate properly in a multi-country workplace that is infused with cultural diversity. The required skillset and attitude for dealing

with this multifaceted work basis seem to be/are characterised by an intense capacity for cultural assimilation, coordination and organisation, given the physical distance between the parties and the cultural barriers to overcome. This consequently/also implies an extremely flexible capability of working in accordance with the proprieties and time zone of all parties. Referring to the work of Shaffer et al (2012, p. 1,300) and put in a more general way, it can be noted in a somewhat summarising term that IBTs have to be 'cognitively flexible' or in other words: they must be able 'to adjust their thought patterns and scripts to effectively interact with people and adapt to situational demands across cultures'. In their research, Shaffer et al (2012) consider this 'cognitive flexibility' in question as one of the three dimensions that characterise 'global work experiences' – and thus in this case also the business travel under study. However, Shaffer et al (2012) do not integrate the concept into their description of what IBTs are. Although Cappellen (2008) refers in her definition of 'global managers' to a competence such as this to be able to work with various cultures at the same time, she considers physically travelling not to be part of the role in question (see 2.2. GLOBAL STAFFING OPTIONS: LOOKING BEYOND EXPATRIATION). In this respect, there is therefore no complete resemblance with the IBT, who is indeed assumed to travel. Considering the findings in this IBT study and more specifically the emphasis found on flexibility (flexibility from a geographical, objective, as well as from a cultural and human approach), the need arises to refine the definition of what IBTs are. The definition previously put forward whereby IBTs are indicated as 'professionals travelling internationally (to various locations) for business purposes on a regular basis, without the accompanying presence of family (with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks)' already contains, interpreted freely, the time and business aspect combined with travelling (Shaffer et al 2012). Nevertheless, in order to characterise the IBT in a more practically appropriate and comprehensive manner, the term 'cognitive flexible' should be added to the aforementioned definition. Consequently IBTs could be understood as follows:

- cognitively flexible professionals;

- travelling internationally (to various locations) for business purposes on a regular basis, without the accompanying presence of family (with no specific duration of residence being set, although limiting it to a maximum of three weeks) (Shaffer et al 2012).

Although the main objective of this study did not involve seeking out a definition of the IBT, the aforementioned completion nevertheless concerns a conscientious, new contribution for practitioners working with IBTs, or who wish to initiate a collaboration with them. McKenna and Richardson (2007) after all indicate that organisations that have the insight concerning the nature and the required type of international assignments are able to make more efficient decisions regarding who is eligible to carry these out – in this regard, a more specific assignee description therefore adds value. In addition, Collings, Scullion and Morley (2007) in this context signal that many organisations still undervalue the importance of soft skills as a selection criterion for international managers. Since, with this study, a focus on cognitive flexibility has already been added in the IBT assignee description, the need and consequently thus also the importance of specific soft skills is acknowledged. The more refined conceptualisation of the IBT term provided with this study also implies – from a more academic point of view – a substantial contribution to knowledge. Although the adjusted concept was developed within a limited Belgian research context, it offers a supplementation to the burgeoning field of knowledge of non-long-term international assignees, which can be applied for further comparison or contrasting – as was initially intended with this work (see 1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES).

Furthermore, it also proved notably perceptible that IBTs fulfil an important role within their respective organisations, independent of their hierarchical level. Throughout the interviews, the combination of foreign experiences with knowledge of the operation and vision of the home base demonstrated to be of both operational and strategic value. In addition and indirectly gleaned from the interviews, IBTs emerged as facilitators for successful inter- or intra-firm operations due to their literal and figurative (virtual or process-oriented)

created proximity. Taking decisions and providing strategic leadership appeared to be enriched through this combined business experience (abroad/at home). The strategic value of the IBT for organisations operating internationally, assumed in literature (by amongst others: Tahvanianen, Welch and Worm (2005), Welch and Worm (2006), Welch, Welch and Worm (2007), Stroh et al (2008), Beaverstock et al (2010) and Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt (2010)), was consequently confirmed as real. The IBT study participants nevertheless interpreted this reality differently and personally, whereby a blend of conviction and modesty was observed. This nuanced position concerning the importance of the IBT role can be considered an interesting supplement to that which was found in literature (by the aforementioned summary of authors, amongst others). From an entirely critical angle, nuancing such as this appears somewhat realistic, and a logical outcome of this research. After all, in contrast with that which was found in literature, in the interviews conducted for this work the interpretation of role importance amongst the IBTs themselves was specifically gauged, which formed the basis of a more refined and acquired assessment of importance (see 7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE).

6.1.2. WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE FOR THE IBT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

Insight concerning the distinctiveness of the IBT psychological contract – specifically the contract content and nature – was gained based on eighteen power words/obligations characteristic of these contracts. The themes and sub-themes in question, found to be essential, are presented once again in the table below (table 10), together with their indication according to contract categorisation/nature and the composite sentence under which the discussion fell:

Table 10: summary of key-obligations within the content of the psychological contract, with an indication to their nature and the resulting thematic combinations

| EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS | EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS | THEME COMBINATIONS WITH DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS |
|---|---|---|
| | Role behaviour: in-role behaviour: transactional extra-role behaviour: relational proactive role behaviour: relational | <i>IBT role behaviour: hand in hand with support and flexibility employers are obliged to provide</i> |
| Support: transactional/relational | | |
| Flexibility: relational | | |
| Job content: responsibility: relational travel: relational diversity: relational | | <i>An attractive and diverse IBT job content... to be provided by the employer, although... with a hefty dash of freedom!</i> |
| Freedom: relational | | |
| | Loyalty: relational | <i>The IBT: a committed human resource... although only within an inspiring work environment with development opportunities</i> |
| Development: vertical: transactional horizontal: relational personal: relational | | |
| Social atmosphere: family: relational work atmosphere – collegiality: relational respect and trust: relational | | |
| Financial rewards: transactional | | <i>The ambiguity (?) concerning IBT financial rewards</i> |
| Open relation: relational | | <i>Meeting of minds as the basis for a solid collaboration</i> |

The elements included in the table above were – as stated in the data analysis section of this work (5. DATA ANALYSIS) – discussed in an entirely personal manner and verified according to their peculiarity with literature available concerning the psychological contract or related subjects on both international assignees (mainly expatriates) and Belgian employees. This

broad comparison with limited similar studies entailed not only a mix of similarities and contrasts, but a number of more general critical remarks also developed that are dealt with in what follows.

The link with the studies reviewed that concentrate on international non-expatriates (named in different ways) could be made fairly clearly. The psychological contract elements found indirectly in the studies of Welch, Welch and Worm (2007), Stahl et al (2009) and Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) could be observed in the experiences shared by the research participants (although they were worded differently). This theoretically supposed contract content (partly noted in *table 4*) specifically comprises the following **employer** obligations: job content, hierarchical advancement, ability to balance work and private life, learning and personal development, networking, money and wealth and organisational support.

In relation to employer obligations, the 'networking' dimension in the psychological contract of the Belgian IBTs interviewed emerged as less prominent; however, it constituted the subject of discussion (but rather to be found in relation with the first sub-research question). In contrast, compared with the aforementioned literature, the 'freedom' obligation identified in this study demonstrated to be new and determining for the IBT psychological contract – although this idea of freedom leans very strongly on the high degree of autonomy that characterises an expatriate psychological contract (Pate and Scullion 2010). The data also supported the argument (found in the studies of Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997) and Atkinson (2007b)) that financial rewards as an obligation act as a hygiene factor, rendering its interest very strong until they are fulfilled. This ascertainment came substantially to the forefront in the stories of Florence, Cindy and Andy. An emphasis such as this is also consequently an example of the individual differences and variations according to psychological contract content that could be discerned. Nevertheless, heterogeneity in general was entirely expected, since the interviewees' 'idiosyncratic experiences and psychological contract interpretations' were sounded by means of in-depth interviews (Conway and Briner 2009, p. 97).

The **employee** obligations identified with this study – role behaviour and loyalty as pure employee obligations on the one hand and social atmosphere and an open relation as shared obligations on the other – constitute valuable findings. Given that employer obligations are principally (only) detected in the – limited – related/abovementioned literature, the said employee obligations already contribute to a broader knowledge base and probably more realistic IBT psychological contract insight. Notwithstanding this – more complete and new – insight, comprising noteworthy contract items (proactive role behaviour), the division of obligations with the enumeration in table 10 (and 9) could have created the impression that employer obligations still constitute the key element of the psychological contract of the IBTs interviewed. Nonetheless, this (greater) focus on the employer's responsibility is by now nothing new, yet confirms what was discovered in previous psychological contract research. For instance, to illustrate this specifically, reference can be made to the listing of obligations stated in table 3 of this work (the content of which has been derived from studies by Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997), Freese (2007) and Conway and Briner (2009)). In this table, the summarised employee obligations represent only half the number of the employer responsibilities. It should be clear that independently of where the centre of gravity lies (employer/employee), the results of this research do not cast any doubt over the accepted bilateral definition of the psychological contract, which is interpreted as consisting of the perceptions of mutual obligations (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997, p. 151).

Based on the themes and categorisation indicated in table 10 – as a summary of that which was explained in detail in the analysis section of this work – it was furthermore observed (for the vast majority of the respondents of this study) that the psychological contract balance leaned rather in the direction of the relational. However, it cannot simply be stated that the relational side has/had the extreme upper hand. The nature of this study does not strive for any generalisation – the individual and heterogeneous contract accents also impede this. In addition, content-related elements are to be interpreted in a context-related manner, and can sometimes be categorised in various ways according to nature, such as the theme of

support stated in table 10. Consequently a strictly relational psychological-contract labelling is/was rendered impossible. This observation did not emerge as entirely surprising – the literature review of this study already referred to the fact that creating a transactional/relational contract subdivision is simply not possible, and constitutes a subject of non-conclusive academic discussion (Arnold 1996 in Atkinson and Cuthbert 2006, p. 649; Conway and Briner 2009). Just as Pate and Scullion (2010, p. 69) concluded in their expatriate research, the issue of whether the contract relationship is relational or transactional actually proves to be even more complex than is derived from or presented in literature.

Without thus designating the IBT psychological contract as explicitly relational, the relational focus of this found was nevertheless notable, as indicated earlier in this work to some degree expected, but on certain levels contrary to what is encountered in international literature. Recent research into expatriate psychological contract and ‘boundaryless careerists’ refers to an increased and more prevalent impact of the transactional aspect within psychological contracts of international employees (Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson 2005, p. 341; Stahl et al 2009; Pate and Scullion 2010). This economic contract focus also follows the flow and transition – already recognised in the mid-1990s – of old relational contracts to the new, transactionally tinted, deal (Rousseau 1995; Hiltrop 1996; Cavanaugh and Noe 1999). In fact, the findings gained here are rather/more connected with the expatriate studies conducted previously (in the 1990s) in which the psychological contract was still – principally – seen as steeped in relational elements (Guzzo, Noonan and Elron 1994; Lewis 1997). Viewed from a broader position – yet not dealt with further in this study – this ascertainment raises the objection of whether or not the transition from old to new contracts described in the literature has in fact taken place. This critically placed question made is nevertheless not a completely unknown detail within the psychological contract knowledge field. Conway and Briner (2009, p. 49) for instance point out in their work that ‘it is difficult to evaluate whether or not there was an actual transition from an old contract to a new contract because no decent historical data with which to test the proposition are available’.

Independent of the fact that a psychological contract transition has taken place and despite the affinity found with the relational contract-nature, the results of the IBT interviews conducted here also disclose a transactional contract flavour. The individual way in which the IBT labour relationship is devised and the importance of financial rewards (stressed by some participants) indicated this undeniably.

In a certain sense, a connection is thus found with the Belgian psychological contract research whereby the mix of both relational and transactional elements within an evolving psychological contract is accepted (Sels et al 2000; De Cuyper et al 2008). The opinion formation – not explicitly requested, yet ascertained recurrently – concerning the financial aspect within the psychological contract also corresponds with the financial Belgian drive that Sels et al (2000) encountered – without being able to state an absolute assessment of importance or one shared by all interviewees. The similarities with the findings of Van den Brande et al (2002c) and Vloeberghs, Pepermans and Thielemans (2005) concerning Belgian high potentials are in addition striking. This is because in the IBT study conducted here, it is noted – several times – that the individual assumes a certain responsibility for his/her career and psychological contract formation.

Nevertheless, the comparison with Belgian psychological contract research is also not fully developed; although certain IBT psychological contract obligations displayed similarities to some degree. Besides the travel aspect, specifically for the IBTs' job content and their (in-/extra-) role behaviour, the loyalty obligation that was ascertained amongst the IBTs interviewed does not entirely correspond with the psychological contract characteristics of Belgian employees stated by Sels et al (2000), nor with the trend discussed by Soens et al (2005). According to Sels et al (2000), the Belgian psychological contract reflects a high connection between employer and employee. Amongst the highly educated, Soens et al (2005) already saw a trend, although not dominant, towards more career transition and thus less loyalty. In contrast to the findings of Soens et al (2005), generally speaking the idea of loyalty could veritably be discerned amongst the IBTs interviewed

for this study; however the reverse loyalty obligation, i.e. the employer offering job security, emerged less expressly during the interviews. This consequently diluted the 'high connection' referred to by Sels et al (2000). The IBTs consulted did not explicitly voice that the employer must offer them (unconditionally) the possibility of continual collaboration. Reference to a certain risk for non-loyal employer behaviour was touched on by several IBTs. Andy for instance referred to a danger, deemed entirely normal and acceptable, in relation to job security and discussed this as follows: *'... the human factor in the organisation is low (...). So I certainly never take my position for granted. And I don't think that's so bad, it doesn't bother me that that's how it is.'* Just like the others, Walter furthermore stated that compelling or expecting loyalty on the part of the employer is neither realistic nor possible: *'No, job security, well that's again something else. You get a permanent contract but you can be sure of it, if you no longer do your work properly then you won't last a month and you can go like anyone else. Those are things that you just can't ever inflict [on an employer].'*

In summary, it can be posited that the IBT psychological contract investigated here differentiates itself as a hybrid and also uniquely employment deal. The contract combines relational elements with a particular transactional dimension, whereby it on certain levels displays similarities yet also contrasts with psychological contracts of other international (expatriates as well as non-long-term) assignees and Belgian employees. The IBT employment deal nevertheless involves – and with a certain degree of unanimously conveyed conviction – an open partnership with mutual idiosyncratic bilateral obligations interpreted according to importance, through which a clear role for the employer has been set out; although not one comprising job security.

With these psychological contract findings – in fact for the first time, although from a specific Belgian research context – a substantial insight is offered into IBTs' unique working partnership. This thus hereby lays foundations for a body of knowledge to be further explored concerning the IBT psychological contract.

6.1.3. WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE IBT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT?

The state of the IBT psychological was discussed conclusively in the analysis section with a predominantly positive experience. This positivity characterised not only the IBTs' shared experiences, but also the dialogue between the researchee and myself as the researcher. Within the IBT work context in which this study was situated and from the IBT point of view, breach experiences were rather an exception than a norm. This disempowers yet the supposition found in literature (by amongst others Robinson and Rousseau (1994), Conway and Briner (2000), Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) and Van den Brande et al (2002b)) that breach applies as a norm. In addition, the perceived consent does not correspond with the expatriate contract dissatisfaction encountered in the studies of Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994), Paik, Segoud and Malinowski (2002) and Pate and Scullion (2010). These findings consequently imply an additional contribution to the existing scientific debate concerning the already non 'norm' position of breach experiences – dealt within in the relevant literature section of this work (see 3.3. THE STATE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT).

The breach experiences reported, and interpreted as being minor, were all found at obligation, not overall, contract level. Given the ambiguous IBT contract nature, insight concerning the associations discussed and criticised in literature between contract nature and breach was therefore absent.

The critical disposition of a fulfilled IBT psychological contract was in contrast given due consideration; after all, a breach experience was perceived and indicated as a cause for a potential rupture/end of contract. The 'irreversible' nature of breach indicated by Rousseau (1998, p. 129) was supported with this, as well as the impact relationship found to be significant between psychological contract breach and turnover intentions (Freese 2007). The 'IBT power awareness' hereby derived – and thus the deviation from the traditional absolute employer power within in the/a work relationship – nevertheless appears not entirely new in literature (Larsen 2004; Nauta

2012). Certain authors (including Yan, Zhu and Hall (2002) and Stahl et al (2009)) explicitly refer in this context to the increased degree of employee bargaining power vis-à-vis the other party and discuss this as specifically occurring within a global work framework (in which this thesis is situated). It is nevertheless notable that the IBTs interviewed in this study do not allow the power awareness to evolve into a full asymmetry in their work relationship, with the employer as the 'new subordinator' to the exercise of their (the IBTs') authority (Cullinane and Dundon 2006). For instance, the fact that the loyalty obligation is only perceived from the employee's viewpoint already prevents a trend such as this. An employee attitude inclined to opportunistic conduct (as a theoretical consequence of an altered employer-employee balance) also appears – at least according to my interpretation – not to have been discovered in the IBTs' stories (for this purpose, see the discussion/report on the theme of role behaviour and the tolerance attitude indicated in this work's analysis section) (Yan, Zhu and Hall 2002). The interesting and unique complexity of the IBT work partnership is therefore once again touched on with this unexpressed/ambiguous power balance direction. The Belgian 'paradox' culture and labour-market context whereby there is respect for authority, although with a degree of flexibility/pragmatism to be applied, could provide an explanation... or the diversity of power actors (governments, trade unions, etc.) could also have an impact on said relationships within a Belgian work plan (Sels et al 2000; Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro 2011)... Focused research into power dynamics and the interdependence of parties within the psychological contract of Belgian IBTs therefore emerge with the abovementioned reflections as an exciting route for further investigation.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that, independently of the abovementioned power dynamics discussion, the breach experiences shared – limited in number – did not (yet) in practice imply any end to a relationship. Trust in improvement or breach resolution was demonstrated as a buffer against the realisation of negative work- or emotional outcomes following breach. The impact of a trust conviction such as this shows similarity with the thoughts of, amongst others, Rousseau (1989), Robinson (1996), Pate (2006) and Agarwal and Bhargava (2014). Rousseau (1989, p. 129) specifically stated

that the intensity of broken-contract reactions (in her terminology nevertheless referred to as 'violation') is also determined by 'more general beliefs about respect for persons, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behaviour associated with relationships including trust'. Robinson (1996) presented the mediating role of trust with her quantitative longitudinal study of newly appointed managers in the Midwestern US. Agarwal and Bhargava (2014) (with their study conducted within the country context/culture of India) also discussed the mediating role of trust in breach-outcome relationships. Pate (2006) likewise remarked – by referring to Robinson (1996) amongst others – the significant influence of trust on the probability that contract breach will lead to violation. For the IBTs interviewed in this work, trust in the employing organisation consequently constituted in an equivalent manner an extremely critical factor within the psychological working relationship – which was also identified in this study as a contract obligation to be provided bilaterally (for this, see [table 10](#)).

The noted influence of trust in the relationship between contract breach and the associated negative employee reaction should nevertheless not be deemed an indication for a theory to be generalised. The interference in question must be placed in the context of this study execution, whereby an attempt was made to acquire a more practical and richer understanding of the IBTs' psychological contract (Miles and Huberman 1994). Still, the positive and mediating influence of trust in the stories shared cannot be denied.

Besides trust as a critical factor mediating between breach and the consequential negative outcomes, a notable role also turned out to have been assigned for IBTs themselves for the purpose of breach prevention. Compared with the international and Belgian psychological contract research referred to several times throughout this study, a responsibility for breach prevention of this kind is not always and/or immediately linked to the employee. For instance, in their study, Pate and Scullion (2010) assign a role to the organisation proactively to influence the expatriates' psychological contract expectations in order to minimise misunderstandings (resulting from

these). De Vos and Meganck (2009) refer to companies' HR policies as steering employee retention (and thus psychological contract fulfilment). The employer or organisation accordingly usually proves to be in the spotlight in the case of breach prevention or psychological contract management (Guest and Conway 2002); an ascertainment that is also found in the work of Conway and Briner (2009). The latter authors refer to the active role generally occurring in literature for the organisation in psychological management as 'managerialist bias' (Conway and Briner 2009, p. 174). Notwithstanding this somewhat biased determination, in this situation/study in question, the role assigned to the employee, IBT, was prominent. The awareness that the IBT assigns him/herself a clear responsibility in the psychological contract management with his/her employer consequently contributes – from a theoretical angle – to an expanded understanding of roles of parties within psychological contract research (thus supplementary to the multifarious, intercultural, and strategic IBT role).

6.1.4. CONCLUSION

Building on the above and referring back to the main research question of this study, namely: '**How do IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contract with their employers?**', it can generally be concluded that this study has led to interesting related comprehension. Moreover, the understanding developed valuably contributes to both the existing – advancing – International HRM literature and to the broad research area of the psychological contract (as dealt with in greater detail later in this chapter, see 6.4. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE).

The self-disclosing quality of phenomenological research entailed – besides what could be expected out of/derived from the literature – also new and sometimes unanticipated insights (Gibson and Hanes 2003).

In this regard, it should be highlighted that concentrating on the IBT psychological contract additionally implied the cautious and entirely

personally sensed theme development concerning, to put it broadly, 'gender differences'. Particularly, it turned out that on certain levels and to a certain degree, the contract interpretation of the IBTs interviewed displayed idiosyncrasies which were linked with the matter of male-female characteristics/suitabilities for international work. For instance, the atypical nature of female IBTs, specifically female IBTs with children, formed the subject of discussion a few times with associated, highly resolute opinion-sharing. Within the mind-set and work context of several study participants, an IBT life was not looked upon as 'normal' or 'usual' for a woman. If the studies of Adler (2002), Tung (2004) and Altman and Shortland (2008) amongst others, are considered, in which women are branded as suitable and valuable candidates for international work, practice – at least as outlined by the IBTs interviewed – therefore proves to demonstrate a degree of deviation. The gender-biased vision shared by some participants of this study was nevertheless interesting (and noted with both male and female IBTs participating in the research). An actual negative prejudice in relation to the non-standard fit of women in an IBT role was strongly present with Florence, for instance. The following interview passage illustrates this: *'I experience and I understand perfectly that an employer isn't going to take on a woman of 24-30 for a role such as this... however discriminatory that is. People who are fairly educated have their children somewhat later, 30-35, sorry, but if you then have to travel... I have one child now, I consciously chose that, that can still be combined. It's still doable. But honestly with two or three children, that absolutely can't be combined. You just can't do it. And I also think, you can't do that to your employer. I wouldn't think it's fair to say: I'm going to build up a career here, your employer gives you everything, and then go and say a few months/years later: 'I want these and those conditions, I can't be flexible any more, and so on...' So I understand it. As an employer, I'd rather have a man for a role such as that. It is discriminatory, but my way of living is very unusual. I'm really an off one out (...).'* Without this study assuming the aim of detecting male/female differences in the IBT psychological contract, the gender particularities remarked, yet not fully spelled out, offer a window of opportunities for further research as discussed in what follows (6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH).

6.2. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The research conducted and described with this work has a number of limitations that must be taken into consideration when interpreting the research results.

First and foremost this work was performed within a strict time deadline. The combination of study and work made providing sufficient time for pure study challenging. The research undertaking was consciously phased and divided into sub-projects. The moments for reviewing the literature up to analysing data and writing out the various thesis chapters were planned in advance and adhered as best as possible. This structured way of working may possibly have formed a limitation to the creative development and incision of this study. Nevertheless, the study focus was intense at the moments possible for this; the related critical reflection remained continual. In parallel to the time pressure, a set word count also had to be taken into consideration. The deliberation over what was and was not included in the main text of this work constituted a source of nervousness; it also required intense thought and repeated (time-consuming) reading. The main text of this work is therefore the result of my own interpretation of information importance, which was also validated by the study supervisor.

A **second** limitation of this study involves the data that was taken for analysis and specifically the data sources, the IBTs interviewed. The IBTs who participated in this research were asked to share descriptions, personal experiences and observations concerning their current working relationship (whether retrospective or not). This information-sharing was as a result extremely dependent on the degree to which the IBTs interviewed were willing or able to share their experiences at the time of the inquiry. The IBTs extroversion, but also their way of conveying information (very detailed or general) likewise determined the depth of data content to be analysed.

A **third**, different limitation relates to the approach used for elaborating the study. From a methodological point of view, it was opted to devise the study

by means of interpretive phenomenology. Although the strengths and relevance of this research strategy were explained, a critical marginal comment has to be made. The identification of essential opinions and the thematic analysis are wholly dependent on the analysis capacities of the researcher (in this case, myself). Despite the supervisor of this study having looked at the analysis over my shoulder, this does not mean any absolute guarantee for a top-quality analysis. Nevertheless, there was conscious personal endeavour for and considerable commitment to achieving superiority in findings. It is furthermore indisputable that despite the abovementioned sense of quality, the findings are susceptible to a different interpretation when both reading and resuming the study. This limitation was nevertheless impeded by clarifying the various analysis steps as transparently as possible – also as described in the chapter concerning the retention of study quality (4.6. QUALITY CRITERIA).

6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH

As stated by Gibson and Hanes (2003, p. 200), a phenomenologically elaborated study is extremely appropriate as a basis for new research or further theory development. The insights and findings presented here can therefore form a broad inspiration for further research.

An initial pathway to extension and one already presented in the literature study of this thesis (3. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT) concerns the **operationalisation** of the psychological contract concept.

This is because firstly this work only focuses on the point of view of the employee, the Belgian IBT. Given that the psychological contract definition applied here is/was conceived bilaterally, this basic research principle was reasoned from a practical standpoint and justified. However, a logical recommendation following on from this for further research concerns acquiring insights into the psychological contract interpretation of **the other non-employee party**, namely the organisation. In this regard,

research and more focused attention concerning who the organisation represents is an interesting associated research path too. In connection with this – as already touched on by other authors earlier in this work – research into the power differential between that organisation and its employees is viewed as a particularly fruitful line of inquiry (one which is apparently being under-investigated at present) (Larsen 2004; Cullinane and Dundon 2006; Pate and Scullion 2010).

Secondly, the psychological contract was not studied in this work as a **process**, without nevertheless undervaluing or denying the dynamic nature of the contract. An again fairly logical study extension consequently consists of starting to conceive the psychological contract from a process perspective and providing/somewhat reworking research in that sense. Conway and Briner (2009), amongst others, call for this vehemently in their book, and refer in particular to practical management insight stemming from a process-oriented research approach. Specifically a re-questioning of the same population within the foreseeable future would offer an enriching understanding concerning the tenability and evolution of psychological contract obligations previously set or deemed important – supplementing a contact such as this with an IBT diary assignment, as Conway and Briner (2002) previously did, certainly appears extremely instructive (from both a scientific and practical point of view), yet hugely challenging. In connection with this, the remarkable IBT positivity concerning their work deal coupled with the assumed degree of tolerance in the case of contract issues also emerge/are eligible for further causal study; study whereby the breach concept must then be viewed more broadly than an ‘isolated exchange event’ (Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro 2011, p. 22).

Further study could also, as indicated earlier in this chapter, concentrate on the **possible differences between male and female IBT psychological contract interpretations and their suitability for performing IBT assignments/roles**. Despite the fact that attention concentrated on a male/female comparison of phenomenon-interpretation did not form the

principal subject of this study, some specific observations could be made. Since, according to Adler (2002) there is an innovative and strategic advantage that stems from mixing female and male perspectives in global business, it would appear worthwhile to investigate this further and to explore in particular if there are stereotypical barriers within the Belgian-coloured IBT context in which this study is/was situated. Whether or not combined with the male/female differentiation, as an extension or optimisation of this work it also seems value-adding to conduct research into the personality of the subjects of study, the IBTs. Various authors such as Raja, Johns and Ntalianis (2004), yet also Tallman and Bruning (2008), already closely examined with their work the link between personality and the psychological contract, and thereby arrived at extremely interesting conclusions.

Lastly, and if it were possible to work further with the sample of organisations collected here, an **insight into the psychological contract of non or ex-IBTs** within the corresponding company context looks to be particularly fascinating. After all, this way supplementary motivation or contradiction could be identified concerning the uniqueness of the IBT psychological contract encountered with this study.

6.4. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The psychological contract of a work population not previously studied, Belgian IBTs, was investigated from a research point of view to be systematically applied in the field of International HRM and within psychological contract studies – interpretive phenomenology (Gibson and Hanes 2003; Ehrich 2005; Gill 2014). Consequently, and set out strictly in black and white, the **scientific contribution** of this study is sound.

Viewed from a **content-related level** and as proposed in the introduction of this work (see 1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY), the study contributes to both the recently developed study area of non-long-term international assignments

(within the International HRM school) and to the broad research field of the psychological contract in general.

The specific, new and refined, insights into the IBT definition and role, certainly form an in-depth contribution to the stream of research – currently to be further developed – of alternative, non-expatriate, international work. This theoretical contribution is broadened by critically comparing and contrasting the IBT-related findings with other forms of international employment. With this study, existing International HRM research related to the subject is consequently being elaborated on in parallel.

With the integration of the psychological contract framework within the International HRM research school, this study also collaborates on increasing the scope of International HRM research and its diversity or multi-disciplinarity (Björkman and Welch 2015). Put differently, the use of a study concept recognised as ‘mature’ (the psychological contract) contributes to the ‘maturing nature of the International HRM as a field of scientific endeavour’ (Conway and Briner 2009, p. 15; Björkman and Welch 2015, p. 136).

Additionally, the focus on the IBT psychological contract and the positive IBT experiences thereby exposed concerns an enriching supplement to the discussion in literature on the effects of business travel on the traveller in question and his/her work and environment. Nevertheless, the positive personal and professional impact on business travel present is currently only being studied to a limited degree (Westman, Etzion and Chen 2009).

It should furthermore be noted that this work also specifically differentiates itself within the broad field of psychological contract research due to its reported double contract content dimension. After all, various studies focus explicitly on the employer obligations being part of the contract, and shed no light on the employee obligations (De Cuyper et al 2008, Freese and Schalk 2008; Conway and Briner 2009). From a/the exchange perspective in which this work features, both employee and employer obligations are dealt with – which in addition, with the (limited) reference studies available, are set

against the psychological contract content of Belgian employees and/or other international assignees (Freese and Schalk 2008). This differentiated study advantage is supplementarily enhanced by the concentration on/discussion of noteworthy new obligations within the IBT work deal, specifically such as proactive role behaviour. This employee obligation only appears to receive limited attention within the psychological contract literature considered, despite the fact that – paradoxically enough – proactive behaviour is acknowledged as an extremely significant determinant for an organisation's success in the current dynamic working climate (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Crant 2000; De Vos, Buyens and Schalk 2003; Freese 2007; Conway and Briner 2009; Bal et al 2010; Parker, Bindl and Strauss 2010).

In addition to the content-related study contribution, yet seen from a **research design** point of view, it can be stated that the use of the subjectivistic approach applied also involves an irrefutable methodological expansion of existing psychological contract research. While an approach such as this is susceptible to discussion (as also stated in the section concerning study limitations in this chapter), the use can be viewed as a bright spot in the 'methodological rut' stated by Taylor and Tekleab (2010, p. 279) into which psychological contract research has fallen. Although the roots of the psychological contract research were qualitative in nature, this methodological touch has been watered down over time, and has at present been replaced with a prevailing quantitative standard (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefal 2008; Conway and Briner 2009; Taylor and Tekleab 2010). In this respect, this study contributes towards the nowadays small, yet recognised as imbued with potential, body of published qualitative studies concerning the psychological contract (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall 2008; Conway and Briner 2009). The subjectivistic (interpretive phenomenological) paradigm in which this study execution is situated furthermore responds to the increasing pressure to focus psychological contract research more and more on the individual employment experiences and the complexity of this (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall 2008). As a researcher, I can therefore only hope and welcome that the approach employed here is judged by other academics to be of (new) value and triggers further, more extensive application. As stated by

Dahlberg et al (2001 in Gibson and Hanes 2003, p. 199), the subject matter of phenomenological research is after all limitless and applied in various social sciences (Gibson and Hanes 2003; Ehrich 2005). Embracing this methodology more broadly within psychological contract and International HRM research should therefore be possible; with this work a step towards broadened application has already been taken (Gibson and Hanes 2003; Ehrich 2005; Gill 2014).

Given that Boland et al (2001), amongst others, furthermore state in their research that interpretive knowledge representations are very promising to knowledge transfer, I also feel confident that **practitioners** can learn/take something from my study. I am convinced that this research provides beneficial insights for HR professionals and/or organisations that are or will be involved with IBTs. Direct strengths that can be derived from the study undertaken concern the vivification of the IBT definition and the insight into what is perceived important in and forming part of their employment relationship (a summary of which can be found in table 10). These clear views represent a merit for organisations in order to prosperously begin a working relationship on the one hand and to ensure the chance of the deal entered with an IBT into succeeding on the other. The psychological contract content revealed with this study makes negotiating an employment deal, with the aim of aligning requirements for both parties (employer – employee), more effective (Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997). In addition, the insights acquired make it possible to understand and explain employee behaviour in order – if necessary – to proactively adjust company or HR policies so as to bring/keep the IBT contract in balance with this (Freese 2007; Conway and Briner 2009; Taylor and Tekleab 2010). Since IBTs are nowadays not only strategic, but at the same time also ‘marketable’ human resources (Stahl et al 2009, p. 92) any supplementary understanding and/or initiative in connection with this contract optimisation is valuable. The termination of the IBT employment deal, as ultimate reaction to a breached psychological contract, after all entails a disastrous setback for the development of global business operations (Stroh et al 2008; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2012). Given the diverse but demonstrated to be critical context in which IBTs operate, a

hazard such as this may have far-reaching/impeding consequences for internationally active or expanding companies.

Despite the fact that this work does not strive to arrive at generalised conclusions, besides the aforementioned relevant contributions, a few more useful **general recommendations** for interested practitioners can be presented.

A first recommendation results from it not being possible to propose *the* psychological contract content that was applicable for all of the IBTs from this study, let alone for the entire population. Given the diversity in IBT role implementation encountered and the marked idiosyncratic, unique nature of the psychological contract of those involved, it appears essential that IBT supervisors seek to get to know their (potential) IBTs. **Dialogue** is indispensable in this context in order to arrive and remain at a thorough psychological contract understanding thereby minimising misinterpretations. The organisation or HR managers concerned must consequently abandon a formalised or copied approach and actually enter into in-depth (regular) discussion with their IBTs. Robinson and Morrison (2000) and Guest and Conway (2002) noted – as did Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt (2010), yet indirectly in the context of flexpatriates' lifestyles – that this entering into discussion should be integrated into the staffing process as early as possible in order to lay the foundations for a focused future, breach preventing and transparent working partnership. With this study, the vision of the latter mentioned authors is endorsed and recommended particularly because other academics, for instance Kickul (2001), refer to the positive connection between realistic job previews when recruiting and the falling voluntary turnover ratios. In relation to this, Collings, Scullion and Morley (2007) also indicate that effective selection and recruitment – here recommended as being characterised by the thorough and conversational exchange of (personal/job) information – constitutes a key to successful completion of alternatives forms of international assignments. In the international context in which this work is situated, the value of the dialogue suggested is

consequently strengthened (nevertheless, this does not imply that all terms of the psychological contract should be made explicit).

Along with this communicative interaction, the findings presented indicate that is beneficial for managers to pay attention to building up a relationship of **trust** with IBTs. After all, in this study as well as the work of Robinson (1996) and others, an attitude such as this is shown to impact on breach prevention. Pate (2006, p. 46) specifies in this context that a respectful and trusting relationship between employees and management is increasingly being perceived as a fundamental aspect of effective human resource management. As a result, trust concerns a substantial ground to be present (or created) for satisfactory psychological contract management, especially within today's complex international business environment in which breach-situations are likely to occur more frequently than unquestionable positive contracts (Pate 2006). A further and useful point of note is that literature refers to trust as being a facilitator for an open organisation communication-flow, which again effectively corroborates the recommendation for dialogue (explicated above) (Sharkie 2009).

A subsequent, final yet important message derived from this study is that ***IBTs should assume a role and responsibility in managing their employment deal*** too. Although related literature lacks guidelines and suggestions to this employee empowerment, this work emphasised that the IBT's input – mostly in the form of communication – is crucial for obtaining the content-related, desired psychological contract (Conway and Briner 2009). In addition, a proactive role set aside by and for the assignee concerned proved to prevent misunderstandings surrounding employment deals. It is hence proposed and recommended that both parties involved in the IBT psychological contract, the employer and the employee, take initiative as to dance to the same tune and achieve success.

Without wishing to claim that the aforementioned contributions and recommendations constitute *the* magic formula for successful IBT employment management, it is/was nevertheless intended that with the

insights of this study, organisations operating internationally (and their employees concerned) are to some extent able to alleviate the HR growing-pains with which the management of non-long-term international assignments has to contend (as expressed by amongst others DeFrank, Konopaske and Ivancevich (2000), Mayerhofer et al (2004), Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm (2005), Welch and Worm (2006), Collings, Scullion and Morley (2007), Welch, Welch and Worm (2007), Stroh et al (2008), Beaverstock et al (2009), Demel and Mayrhofer (2010)).

6.5. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Although IBTs are becoming an increasingly popular employee group within the current global economy, research into this population proved to be almost inexistent (Welch and Worm 2006; Welch, Welch and Worm 2007; Beaverstock et al 2010). With the present exploration, this figuratively 'concealed' group of international assignees was – from an, methodologically innovative, subjectivistic paradigm and based on the psychological contract theory – brought to light.

In this study, IBTs arose as strategic human resources with various, intercultural roles and specific, cognitively flexible skills. The psychological contract of the Belgian travellers studied revealed itself as a wholly unique and open partnership with an idiosyncratic mix of relational and transactional foci. The contracts in question turned out to have developed positively with distinct obligations for the two parties involved. The blend encountered of both contrasts and similarities between the findings of this research and related literature emphasised the particularity of the IBT working relationship within today's business landscape.

Notwithstanding the study limitations presented and possible future areas of research, this work valuably contributes to the knowledge field of both International HRM and the psychological contract theory.

The theoretical contribution for the vibrant International HRM school on the one hand translates into critical supplementations and reflections on existing discussions/knowledge relating to: a) the IBT as a new form of and compared with other types of international employment; b) the positive impact of travel experiences. On the other hand, the scope of International HRM research is enriched by integrating the psychological contract framework within this international research discipline. Besides the study of a newly researched labour population, the already comprehensive domain of psychological contract study is being expanded through the concentration on employee obligations being part of a/the contract, and in particular through the content of certain obligations (proactive role behaviour), which previously only received limited research attention.

In doing so practitioners, employees as well as researchers are provided with a rich and expanded understanding of the IBT employment deal in particular.

7. APPENDIX

7.1. REFERENCES

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7.2. INFORMATION SHEET

Dear,

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research.

As explained earlier, I am currently researching a new, more flexible form, of international staffing (which emerges as an alternative for long-term expatriation). The concerned and studied international employees are International Business Travellers. For this study and partly by my own proposed definition, International Business Travellers are presumed to be 'professionals who travel internationally (to various locations) on a regular basis for business purposes, without the accompanying presence of family (without proposing a specific duration of stay, although limiting this to a maximum of 3 weeks)' (Shaffer et al 2012).

The study intends to shed light on the Business Traveller's 'employment deal' or 'psychological contract'. Generally summarising it is attempted to gain understanding of the 'employee's belief and/or interpretation regarding the terms of the exchange agreement (the reciprocal promises and obligations) with the organisation where the study participants/travellers are currently employed' (Rousseau 1995 and Guest and Conway 2002, p. 22).

Considering your international working experience, I am grateful for having the opportunity to discuss your thoughts, feelings and behaviour on this matter. Through your participation, I hope to understand 'the essence' of the characteristics of the psychological contract as it reveals itself in your experience. During the interview – scheduled on (*date and location*) – you will be asked: to describe your relationship with your employer (beyond what is concluded in your legal contract), to define/evaluate aspects you find important in a working relationship (from both an employer and employee viewpoint) and to recall situations or events that you have experienced in the

workplace – after sharing some background information about your career/working history.

Please find enclosed the 'informed consent' document for this study. I would be most obliged if you could complete the form formalising your research participation and bring the signed form with you to the interview.

I value your participation and thank you in advance for your commitment of time and effort. If you would have any further questions before the interview or if there would be a problem with the scheduled date/time of meeting, I can be reached on 0477/25.08.43 or via mail: els.pareit@easypay-group.com.

Kind regards,
Els Pareit
University of Bradford

7.3. INFORMED CONSENT

You are being invited to participate in a DBA-research study that examines 'the Psychological Contract of the International Business Traveller – within a Belgian context'.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked (possibly on more than one occasion) to respond to a series of questions on your experiences, feelings, thoughts and behaviour. For data collection purposes, your responses will be recorded using an audio tape recorder. All responses are and will be treated strictly confidential. Your identity (name and last name) will not be disclosed and that of your employer will not be released or referenced when publishing the results of the study. Audio tape recordings will only be heard by the study researcher and – if necessary – professionals involved in the investigation.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer a question. You may withdraw your participation, or your data, from the study at any time up to the point of publication.

I, (name) have read the consent document, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. I also understand that my responses will be recorded for data collection purposes only. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Research participant and date:

Researcher and date:

7.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE

7.4.1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research.

My name is Els Pareit, doctoral student at the University of Bradford. This interview will concern the partnership that you have with your current employer as an employee/International Business Traveller. The purpose of this interview and other interviews that I am to conduct is to gain an exploratory insight into the employment relationship that IBTs have. I would like to emphasise that there are no wrong and right answers and I would ask you to be as honest as possible. This interview will only be used for my research and results from the answers obtained will be processed into a report anonymously – your responses may be used but you will not be able to be identified. With your consent, the interview will be recorded in tape. The recording will only be used while the interviews are being processed; all information will of course be treated confidentially. As mentioned before, you may withdraw your participation, or your data, from the study at any time up to the point of publication.

(If the respondent confirms, request explicit consent to start recording and ask for the signed consent sheet.)

Do you have any further questions before we start? Please stop me at any time through the interview process if you have questions or need clarification.

7.4.2. THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLER: CAREER HISTORY

First of all, I would like to ask you for some basic information about yourself, your career and your current job.

Background information

- Name + function
 - Organisation (n° of employees) + sector
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Family status
 - Education
-
- Total years of experience with the organisation
 - Total years of international experience with the organisation
 - Total years of experience as an IBT with the organisation
 - Average number of trips per month and length of a trip
 - Assigned to countries/regions

Background information: organising/structuring events and actions into a coherent picture of the career

- Could you tell me the story about your career and the different steps you made towards your current position.

Follow-up questions (to ask more information if needed):

- What were – in your experience – the different moves you made towards your current position within the organisation?
 - How did they come about and why were they important to you?
 - Why did you decide to work for your current employer?
-
- Could you tell me more about the work that you are currently doing. I would like you to go in to as much detail as possible so I have a clear understanding of your work experience.

Follow-up questions (to ask more information if needed):

- What does your current job/function involve and what kinds of responsibilities are you handling?
- Where do you (and your team/supervisor) fit into the organisational structure?

- How would you assess your job-position/-importance within this company? Is this assessment/viewpoint in accordance with the corporate recognition for your job?
- Do you personally feel that your work is valued and appreciated? What makes you feel the way you do?

With this, the first phase of the interview is completed. In the following part, I am going to ask you to reflect about and elaborate on the relationship you have with your employer. The questions that I have for you today are aimed at getting your perspective of the partnership (if present) that you have with your current employing organisation.

The psychological contract of International Business Travellers

- Could you please describe me your relationship with your employer, beyond the employment contract as an assumed basis of your employment relationship? *[If more information needed: would you define your relationship with your employer as a rather economic, business related transaction or an open, socially tinted, partnership.]*

Follow-up questions: How would you define your employer – who represents the employer for you?

- What do you believe your employer is obliged to provide to you within the context of your current International Business Travel assignment? *[Give examples if clarification is needed – see psychological contract items in literature review, table 3.]* When signing up for this position, what did your employer promised you (that was not covered in your formal employment contract)? How were these promises made known to you?
- Beyond what is written/agreed upon in your formal employment contract, what do you consider you are obliged to provide to your employer? What have you done for your employer?

- Did your organisation make any promises to you when it employed you that it hasn't kept/has broken – if yes, please describe this experience.

Follow-up questions (to ask more information if needed):

- Where did the promise originate from? Who broke the promise?
 - How did you feel?
 - What was your reaction following this experience of broken promises?
 - Did it change your relation with your employer?
-
- As you think to the future, how could you describe your expected career plan?
- Follow-up questions (to ask more information if needed):
- How would you describe your wanted career path at this time?
 - Why would you – hypothetically speaking – consider quitting this job?
 - What would make you seriously interested in leaving this company in order to start working for a competitor?
 - How would you evaluate the probability that you remain in this function within 3 years from now?

Final/specific thoughts

Before concluding the interview, I would like to ascertain whether there are still any comments or questions on your part regarding this conversation.

(If there are no comments, proceed to conclude interview.)

I would sincerely like to thank you for participating in this interview. Some feedback (a summary) in relation to this interview/the research will be relayed to you for information purposes – your confirmation of the correctness of the summary made/sent will be asked. I would also like to ask you to allow us to contact you again for a (potential) follow-up interview.

7.5. ROLE OF THE IBT: CONCEPTS, SUB-THEMES AND THEMES

| THEME | SUB-THEME | CONCEPTS |
|--|--------------------|---|
| Role → <i>The multifarious, intercultural, IBT role</i> | Intra-firm role | Setting up/maintaining a network |
| | | Business analysis |
| | | Intra-firm projects |
| | | Consultation with colleagues |
| | | Strategic role |
| | Inter-firm role | Import/procurement |
| | | Consultancy |
| | | Organising (a good collaboration with clients/suppliers) |
| | | Putting the customer in a central place |
| | | Relationship management |
| | | Sales |
| | Diverse | Job content = diverse (a lot of tasks & responsibilities) |
| | | Work-basis |
| | Learning | Learning (fairs/seminars) |
| | | Training |
| | Interculturality | Interested in & interacting with different cultures |
| Role - importance → <i>The IBT as a strategic resource</i> | Job = important | Job = important |
| | Key-responsibility | Taking decisions |
| | | Giving a strategic lead |
| | | Assuming responsibility |
| | Importancy (-) | Importancy (-) |

7.6. LIST OF SUB-THEMES AND THEMES

| THEME | SUB-THEME | LINK WITH RQ |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------|
| Development | Career opportunities --> vertical development | RQ 2a |
| | Broad job development --> horizontal development | |
| | Personal development | |
| Financial rewards | Financial rewards - fair | RQ 2a |
| | Financial rewards - extra | |
| Flexibility | | RQ 2a |
| Freedom | | RQ 2a |
| International travel | International aspirations | |
| | Compensation | |
| Job content | Responsibility | RQ 2a |
| | Travelling | |
| | Job content: diverse + attractive, excl. travelling | |
| Loyalty | Open-ended employee relation focus | RQ 2a |
| | Job security employee | |
| | Close-ended employee relation focus | |
| | Job security employer | |
| Open relation | Openness - employer | RQ 2b |
| | Openness - employee | |
| | Participation | |
| | Evaluation/Feedback | |
| | Transparency/sharing of information | |
| Potential breakers | Financial rewards - fair | RQ 3 |
| | Freedom | |
| | Flexibility | |
| | Statute of independent | |
| Role | Intra-firm role | RQ 1 |
| | Inter-firm role | |
| | Diverse | |
| | Learning | |
| | Interculturality | |
| Role - importance | Job = important | RQ 1 |
| | Key-responsibility | |
| | Importancy (-) | |

| THEME | SUB-THEME | LINK WITH RQ |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| Role behaviour | In-role behaviour | RQ 2a |
| | Extra-role behaviour | |
| | Proactive role behaviour | |
| Social atmosphere | Familial atmosphere | RQ 2a |
| | Work atmosphere - collegiality | |
| | Respect | |
| | Trust | |
| State | Contract in balance | RQ 3 |
| | Minor breach | |
| | No breached obligations | |
| | (Strongly) fulfilled contract | |
| | (Satisfactory) fulfilled contract | |
| Support | Specific arrangements for IBTs | RQ 2a |
| | Support - guidance | |
| | Training | |
| Time focus | Close-ended function focus | RQ 2b |
| | Close-ended employee relation focus | |
| | Open-ended employee relation focus | |
| | Open-ended function focus | |